# PART THREE

# CONSULTANCY KNOWLEDGE BASES

This part turns to some epistemological issues related to consultancy praxis.

# CHAPTER NINE

# CONSULTANCY EPISTEMOLOGY

This chapter is about the forms and nature of knowledge commonly used in the kinds of consultancy described in this book and some associated epistemological issues. Writing this chapter has proved difficult for several reasons. First, epistemology and epistemological issues are referred to in a thorough going way in the description of only a minority of models: they are for instance central to the Soft System Methodology model; they are referred to more briefly in Constructionist Consultancy and Collaborative Enquiry models. Also there is a reference to hermeneutics in the description of the Constructionist Consulting model. But these references are unusual. Second, descriptions of consultancy models tend to concentrate on ways and means of getting at the knowledge required and working at it to good effect rather than at its epistemology. Third, I have failed to find a thoroughgoing exploration of consultancy and epistemology.

This Chapter is a modest contribution towards an understanding of the epistemology of the modes and models of the kinds of consultancy described in Part Two.

Epistemology, literally the theory of knowledge, is variously defined as:

- The theory or science of the method or grounds of knowledge (SOED);

- The theory of knowledge especially with regard to its method and validation (Concise OED);

- That branch of philosophy that addresses the philosophical problems surrounding the theory of knowledge. Epistemology is concerned with the definition of knowledge and related concepts, the sources and criteria of knowledge, the kinds of knowledge possible and the degree to which each is certain, and the exact relation between the one who knows and the object known.[1]

- The study of the kinds of knowledge that are required for solving problems in the world.[2]

- How we know what we know.

Using these definitions as starting points, four questions have helped me to explore consultancy epistemology and underlie what follows.

1. What kinds of knowledge are available to and used by consultors and consultants in the consultancy work described in this book?

2. What are the ideas, concepts and theories which elucidate the nature of these kinds of knowledge?

3. Do these kinds of knowledge lend themselves to reliable and creative use in consultations?

4. And, if so, what are the concepts, approaches methods and conditions which enable them to be used in these ways?

Questions 1 to 3 open up an epistemological enquiry into the knowledge base of consultancy; question 4 opens up an epistemological enquiry into consultancy praxis and its methodological apparatus. They indicate that the efficacy of consultancy will be determined by the ways in which knowledge is used. In the light of what follows they can be used to reflect upon and to interrogate each consultancy model to determine and evaluate its epistemological base.

What has become clear to me through researching and writing this chapter is that the epistemology of consultancy is a substratum of enormous importance to the praxis of consultancy in general and to the modes of models in this booking particular: the validity of consultancy depends upon the validity of its epistemology or its knowledge base. Ideas about epistemology are presented here as a substratum of consultancy praxis to be read off in relation to each model. Attempts to apply them to each model became largely repetitive showing that they provide a common epistemological base.

## 1. Forms of Knowing and Knowledge in Consultancy

Consultations involve consultors presenting information to consultants to facilitate critical conversations about situations and issues they wish to examine. Generally speaking this information will be about: the consultors' purposes, beliefs, theories, situations in which they work; their direct and personal experience of people at work in specific secular or religious organizations or communities in distinct places; relevant aspects of the totality of their knowledge and understanding of the world in general and their disciplines in particular. By the very nature of things and the economy required in information sharing in consultancy this will be only part of the consultor's total knowledge base to which it will be variously connected and disconnected by them. Important functions are performed by the sharing of this information with the consultant: it brings the consultor's situation into touch with the consultant's knowledge base; it makes some links between their respective knowing and knowledge bases. (See Figure 9:1). Also, it brings an increased shared awareness of the consultor's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and values and interpretations or views of how the knowledge is or should be used.

These consultor-consultant connections provide opportunities for collaborative reflective conversations which draw upon the combined knowledge resources of consultors and consultants. Some connections are easily formed and accessed others are hidden from sight and consciousness and difficult to access. In some cases tracing out and mending or creating these connections will be an important consultancy function. Important as this is, it has to do with the use of given knowledge bases but our primary purpose here is to consider the *nature* of the knowing and the knowledge in use.
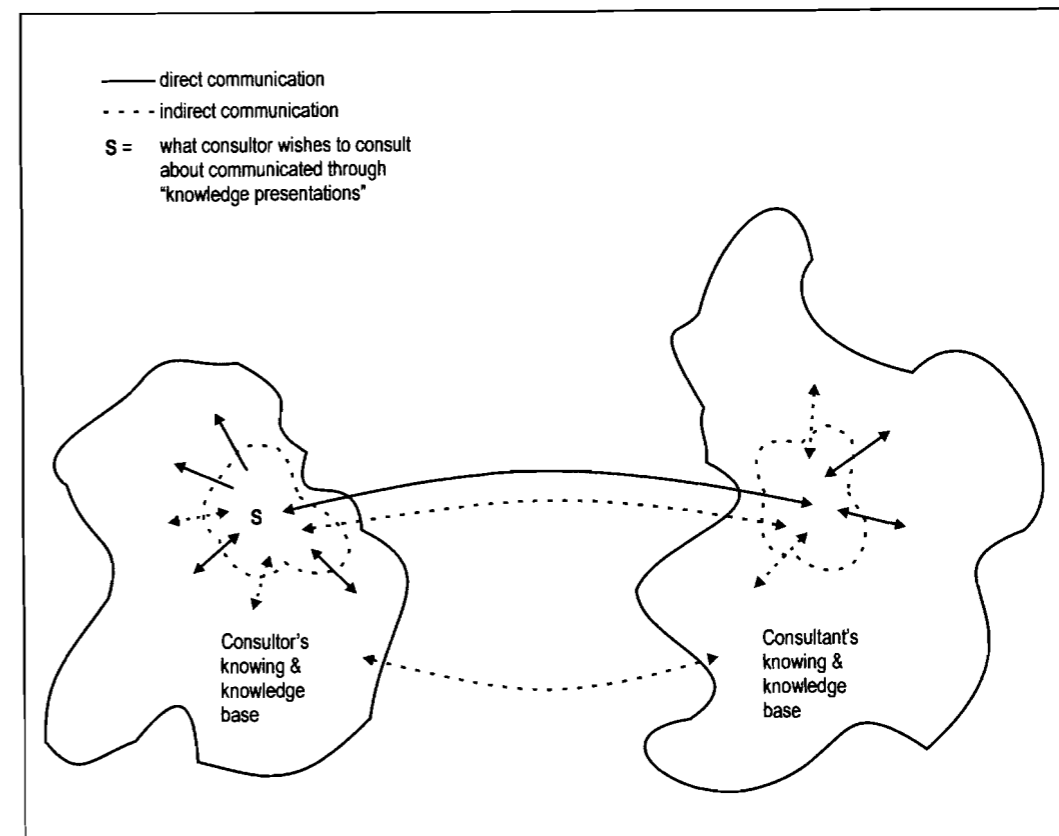


Figure 9:1: Interaction Between Consultors' and Consultants' Knowledge Bases

Consultors and consultants work with several different kinds of knowledge which can be differentiated in the following seven ways.

*(a) Experiential and existential knowing and knowledge*: Experiential and existential knowing is knowledge by acquaintance derived from direct personal experience and existence. They result from human encounters through sustained face-to-face engagement with people, places, things, events, work programmes, projects and the trying out of ideas, theories and research findings. In its raw state this kind of knowledge (in contradistinction to reflective formulations about it) is tacit, intuitive and holistic[3], and tacit knowledge is sometimes compiled into, and therefore hidden in experience. Peter Reason suggests that "...experiential knowing and knowledge tells us of the interplay between the posited world and the presented world".[4]

*(b) Personal knowing: Self-knowing and self-knowledge*: Two aspects which are generic to consultancy are the consultor's and consultant's self-knowing and self-knowledge of themselves as human beings and of themselves as practitioners. Personal knowledge of vocation, an important aspect of self knowing, is, for instance, important in consultancy.[5]

Personal knowing varies greatly in its sophistication. There is a vast amount of relevant literature on such things as: enneagrams; Myers Briggs personality and thinking styles; intelligence quotients, IQ's, and emotional intelligence; stages of intelligence, moral and faith development associated with Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler and many others.[6]

*(c) Interpersonal Empathic Knowing and Knowledge*: Consultancy operates on the basis that people can gain a working knowledge of other people's minds and emotions, i.e. of what they think, believe, feel and know. The possibility of this raises problems for philosophers as does religious knowing[7]. Nonetheless empathic knowing has become a widely accepted part of a family of professional disciplines. The possibility of "virtual insidership" has been established.[8]

*(d) Metaphysical, philosophical moral knowing and knowledge*: The nature, form and significance of this kind of knowledge can vary enormously.

*(e) Religious knowing and knowledge*: This is differentiated from metaphysical, philosophical and moral forms of knowing and knowledge because whilst it contains those elements along with beliefs, it has faith dimensions which emanate from living relationships with spiritual beings – God, Yahweh, Allah. The knowledge is, in fact, both theological and experiential or existential. The religious dimensions of the everyday world are most relevant to consultancy.[9] (See 2 (f) below.)

*(f) Propositional knowing or knowledge "about"*: Propositional knowing is knowledge "that something is the case and is expressed in statements". When "formalized in research it tells us of the researched world". It takes the form of ideas, propositions and theories[10]. It is, therefore, scientific, theoretical and theological knowledge. Anthropological, sociological, organ-izational, phenomenological and ethnomethodological studies and researches are amongst the cluster that are of particular interest to the forms of consultancy discussed in this book both for their methodology and findings.

*(g) Practical knowing or knowledge about "how to"*: Practical knowing takes the form of knowledge about how to do something and is therefore related to abilities, approaches, methods and skills with especial reference to working with people purposefully individually, in groups and in secular and religious organizations and communities. It tells us about the world-of-action.[11] Some of this knowledge is not easily accessed because it is written deep into mental and motor processes which are carried out automatically without conscious thought.

*(h) Historical knowledge and knowing*: In consultancy this takes two intertwined forms: the history of churches, organizations, projects, problems, work programmes, work forces, approaches, methods etc; the vocational history and career paths of consultors and those with whom they work.

*(i) Communicational knowledge and knowing:* Key to consultancy praxis for both consultors and consultants is knowledge about how to communicate and engage with each other in consultancy sessions and then, in relation to that, for consultors to communicate and engage with those with whom they work.

Consultor's presentations are compositions of all or some of these nine forms* of knowing and knowledge: they are the basic common currency of consultancy; consultations operate through them, consciously and unconsciously. They variously inform: world-views within which consultors and consultants operate; their work-views; their understanding of themselves as practitioners.

Wide variations are experienced in the quality, veracity, sophistication and relevance of the knowledge presented by consultors and by consultants. An important aspect of consultancy praxis is to establish viable knowledge bases on which consultors and consultants can work creatively. This is discussed in various parts of this chapter and illustrated throughout the book.

Consultancy operates by using the knowledge directly accessible to consultors and consultants in the most effective way in relation to helping consultors and where this is inadequate, supplementing it by research or from other sources. The aim is to get the best possible knowledge base which is "good enough" in the given circumstance. Desires for a "perfect" knowledge base open out on to the impossible. Feelings that the probity of consultancy depends on such a knowledge base is both unrealistic and debilitating. Clearly the efficacy of consultancy is closely related to the nature and the understanding of the knowledge base, its uses and its limitations.

## 2. Consultancy and Epistemology

The limited objective of this section is to raise briefly some epistemological issues implicit in the nature of the nine forms of knowing and knowledge used in consultancy practice. This forms a modest contribution to the neglected task of formulating an epistemology of consultancy. Exploring in depth the epistemology of the form of consultancy knowledge is beyond the scope of this book and the ability of the author.

*(a) Knowledge: omnipresent actively and latently*: Various forms of knowledge are present in consultancy sessions in two ways. Relevant elements from all forms are extracted as necessary and used by consultors to describe the subject matter about which they wish to consult. The remainder, present in the consultor's conscious and unconscious mind, constitutes the total knowledge context out of which the consultor operates. This simply cannot be assembled and presented in toto. And the economy of consultancy prevents large sections of it being considered. However, it is the principal context, framework, backdrop of all that occurs in the consultancy and a reservoir (pool) to be drawn upon as required. Similarly consultants extract from the totality of their knowledge that which they consider must be made explicit for the consultancy to function effectively and the remainder is, again,

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*Professor Gordon Wells, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, illustrates the role that dialogue plays in the construction of knowledge and the development of understanding in a model entitled the "spiral of knowing". The model has four "segments" (experience, information, knowledge building and understanding) of a series of cycles related to five "modes of knowing" (instrumental, procedural, substantive, aesthetic and theoretical). http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~gwells/NCTE.html; dated 2003 The modes of knowledge notation I have devised relate to consultancy work.

their context, framework, backdrop and a reservoir. Interaction between the elements extracted and communicated by consultors and consultants occurs at both conscious and unconscious levels. Consultancy processes can involve engagement with each and all these bodies of knowledge and how they relate and interact. This is illustrated in Figure 9:2. Teasing out relevant knowledge is a primary and tricky aspect of consultancy for consultants and consultors. Of necessity, they work on selected knowledge. The processes of selection and checking out are critical.
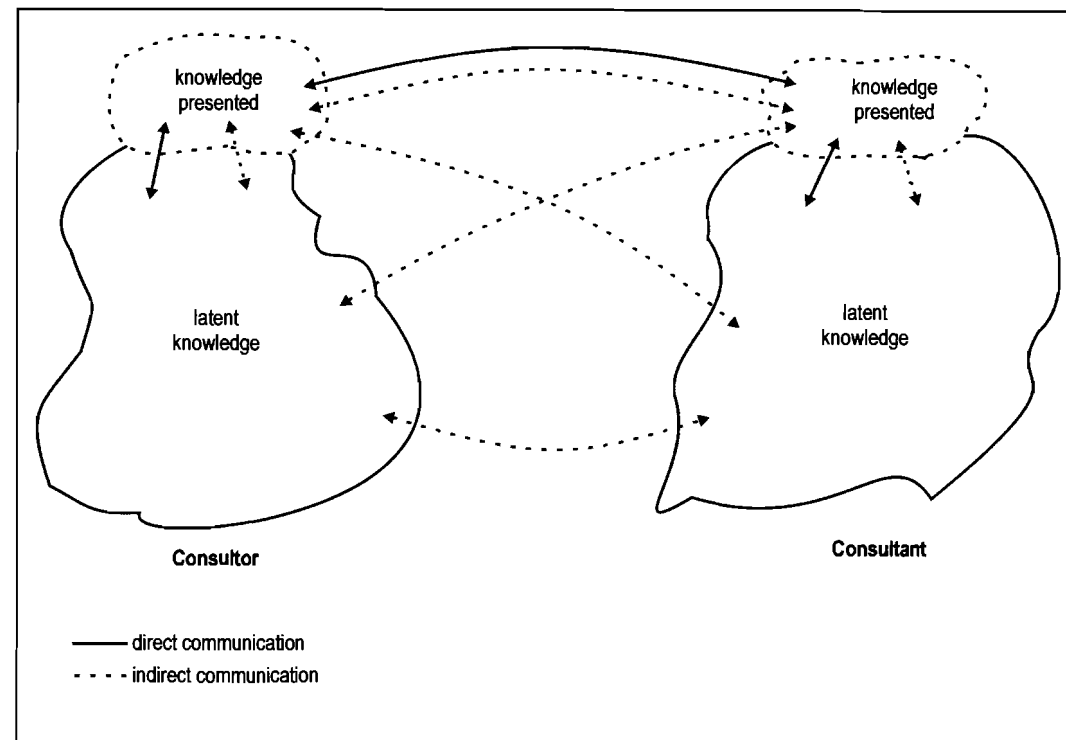


**Figure 9:2 Latent and Active Knowledge in Consultancy**

*(b) Knowledge and Knowing from direct personal and religious experience*: Knowledge and knowing from direct experience of any kind have considerable influential powers over those who possess it. Watts and Williams make important points about any form of direct experience in the following paragraph about religious experience.

> One of the core features of the religious life is coming to *know* from direct experience what may previously have been a mere matter of religious teaching or of faith. This does not necessarily produce any changes in *what* is known, though it may do so, but it changes very radically *how* it is known. Religious knowledge acquired through direct experience seems able to direct people's lives in a way that mere assent to doctrine does not. If one is interested in the inner core of religion, there are few more important things to understand than such direct religious knowing.[12]

*(c) Knowledge: amalgamated and differentiated*: All these forms and expressions of knowing and knowledge have valid and legitimate uses and modes of verification.[13] In consultancy engagements they are present in various permutations. They are correlated in different ways for different tasks. They can form clearly differentiated or messy knowledge bases. Distinguishing them and treating and using them with proper respect to their nature is an important part of good consultancy praxis.

*(d) Subjective and objective content*: The nature of the forms of knowledge used in consultancy is variously and inescapably subjective and objective. This properly represents "the paradox that reality is simultaneously subjective and objective. We *engage* objective realities subjectively..."[14] Proper attention to both is essential; both lend themselves to critical analysis. Scientific thinking was commonly associated with objective knowledge and objectivity; subjective knowledge and subjectivity was not considered scientific. Now, however, subjective knowledge has an increasingly important and scientifically valued place in research and in the praxis of work with people. But to be useful raw subjective knowledge needs to be refined and edited of distortions, biases, prejudices and anxieties, as, of course, does objective knowledge. "Critical subjectivity" is essential to establishing subjective knowledge bases which can be used with confidence in relation to any form of work with people. Consultancy processes are, or need to be, instruments of critical subjectivity. Most of them work on conscious knowing but psycho-analytical models, for instance, work on "unconscious knowing". Consultancy is a way of establishing and forming subjective and objective knowledge for action as well as for reflection[15] and establishing common "subjective agreements" between consultors and consultants. This enables consultors and consultants to work together on the consultor's subjectivity in relation to the consultant's subjectivity. Consequently, consultancy is a means by which consultants help consultors to get a subjective purchase on their subjective and objective worlds. Smail[16] talks about developing 'intuitive sensitivity' which, he says, gives us access to "the intricate and finely balanced subjective world in which we conduct our relationships with each other, register and react to the impressions we give and receive, administer and respond to offers of love or threats of annihilation".[17] Emotional intelligence is a key factor in the ability to be critically subjective about inner and outer realities especially those which are disturbing - as the subject matter of some consultancies are. We act in and on the objective world through our subjective knowledge - or ignorance - as we act on our subjective worlds.

Taking both forms of knowing and knowledge seriously involves avoiding solipsism (the view that the self is all that exists or can be known) and seeing them as complexly intertwined. As Gregory Bateson said, "we create the world that we perceive, not because there is no reality outside our heads ... but because we select and edit the reality we see to conform to our beliefs about the sort of world we live in".[18]

*(e) Knowledge–reality gaps*: No matter how complex and sophisticated our knowledge might be, it does not match the complexity and sophistication of the subjective and objective realities with which consultors and consultants have to deal.[19] It is always partial and incomplete. And, in addition, as noted earlier, the knowledge used in consultancies is selected economically from the total knowledge available to consultors and consultants. (When consultancy processes are creative they can generate meaning and new knowledge and give new meaning to old "knowledge".) Consequently there are significant gaps to be

bridged between realities and their "knowledge representations" which are used in consultancies. "Mind the gap" is a good dictum for consultors and consultants! As described in Section 4 below, knowledge representations are surrogates or stand-ins for reality and to be treated as such. Thinking, feeling and knowing are vital parts of human subjectivity; they are important and integral aspect of being and doing.

*(f) Religious Knowing*: Reference has already been made to an important book by Fraser Watts and Mark Williams, *The Psychology of Religious Knowing*. Watts and Williams make a distinction important to consultancies to religious organizations: "religious knowing involves, not so much coming to know a separate religious world, as coming to know the religious dimensions of the everyday world".[20] Elaborating this they say, "Religious knowing is concerned with a world in which the spiritual and the material interact; both everyday concepts and religious concepts are enriched by this interactionalist perspective".[21] They see similarities between religious knowing, scientific and everyday forms of knowing and personal knowing.[22] "How people gradually come to understand more about themselves seems in many ways to be similar to how they came to understand more about the things of God".[23] In short, they claim that religious knowledge is arrived at by "cognitive processes by which other human knowledge is acquired".[24] (Emotion is involved in cognitive processes and bonds religious understanding to religious experience.) Religious and personal insights, they say, "arise as a result of similar cognitive processes and have many common features".[25] Using "the analogy between personal knowing and religious knowing", they seek to relate religious knowing to cognitive psychology through an exercise in "conceptual mapping".[26] Religious knowing "transcends a crude dichotomy into what is objective and what is subjective".[27] "The validity of both personal and religious insights", Watts and Williams argue, "is difficult to assess..." Searching for either requires: integrity and honesty to evaluate conscientiously; openness; broad, sustained and penetrating attentiveness that goes beyond the obvious and general religious observations and doctrinal clichés; the ability to conceptualise insights.[28] They advocate "the middle way" to religious knowing which is reproduced in Display 9:1.

This association between personal and religious knowing is important directly or indirectly. All consultancies draw upon personal knowledge and knowing to a greater or lesser extent just as they draw upon factual information about situations and events. This can include knowledge about such things as philosophy of life, convictions, commitments, vocation and personal strengths and weaknesses. (Vocational understanding is of especial interest in consultancy work.[30]) Some consultancies draw upon religious knowledge and beliefs and the direct experiences associated with them.

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With religious knowing, it is always necessary to find a middle way:

- it requires seriousness of purpose, but lightness of touch;
- it cannot thrive either when people's emotions are uninvolved or when they are unrestrained;
- it requires a sense of relatedness to God that is neither one of identification with Him nor of alienation from Him;
- it is a matter neither of pure faith nor of pure reason;
- it is independent of observation, but neither does it follow straightforwardly from it;
- it inhabits the realms, neither of private fantasy nor of external reality, but a space between;
- it is a creative act, that goes beyond the "given" but must be faithful to it;
- it shows a capacity, in myth and sacrament, to make connections that are more than merely symbolic representations of literal truths, but without going so far as to confound the symbol with the symbolised;
- it depends on the combination of both genuine personal experience and the effort to articulate it, for neither alone can lead to knowing;
- it requires the intellectual effort and clear-headedness to reach towards religious knowing wherever possible, but also the recognition that there is a time for silence and not knowing.

**Display 9:1 The Middle Way of Religious Knowing**[29]

*(g) Deductive and Inductive Processes*: Employing these forms of knowing variously involves deductive and inductive processes. Inductive processes are used with those forms of knowing which draw on direct experiences. They operate from the particular to the general. This applies to experiential, existential, personal, interpersonal, religious practical and personal historical knowing, see a, b, c, e, f, g and h. Deductive processes are used with those forms of knowing which work from given understandings and theories; they operate from the general to the particular. This applies to metaphysical, philosophical, moral, religious, propositional, practical and historical knowing, see d, e, f, g, h. Deductive processes can lead to inductive processes and vice versa in consultancy sequences which asymptotically approach "truth". Following AW Ghent, such sequences are illustrated in Figure 9:3.[31]
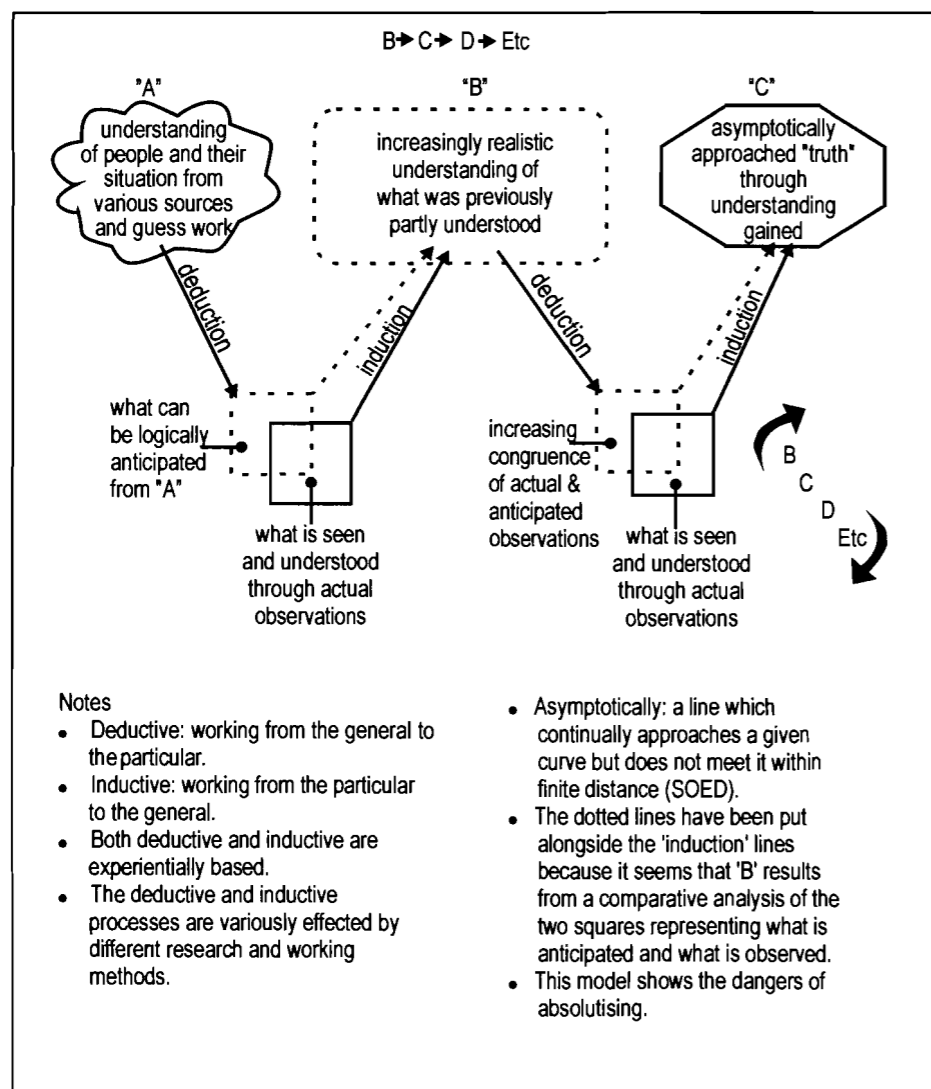
Figure (left, Figure 9:3):

B ➜ C ➜ D ➜ Etc

"A"
understanding of people and their situation from various sources and guess work

"B"
increasingly realistic understanding of what was previously partly understood

"C"
asymptotically approached "truth" through understanding gained

deduction — induction — deduction — induction

what can be logically anticipated from "A"

what is seen and understood through actual observations

increasing congruence of actual & anticipated observations

what is seen and understood through actual observations

B
C
D
Etc

Notes
- Deductive: working from the general to the particular.
- Inductive: working from the particular to the general.
- Both deductive and inductive are experientially based.
- The deductive and inductive processes are variously effected by different research and working methods.

- Asymptotically: a line which continually approaches a given curve but does not meet it within finite distance (SOED).
- The dotted lines have been put alongside the 'induction' lines because it seems that 'B' results from a comparative analysis of the two squares representing what is anticipated and what is observed.
- This model shows the dangers of absolutising.

**Figure 9:3: Deductive and Inductive Processes**

*(h) Conscious and unconscious content:*

All the models described in this book operate through human consciousness. Two of them also use psychoanalytical concepts and operate through the dynamics of the unconscious, one in a thorough going manner (see Chapter Seven).

This chapter is relevant to all the modes and models even though it does not contain a section on the epistemology of psychoanalytical praxis. A book by Andre Haynall does so. It is *Psychoanalysis and the Sciences: Epistemology History* (Karnac Books 1993).

## 3. Epistemological Approaches and Positions

One of the critical aspects of the approach consultors and consultants adopt is their position in relation to knowing and knowledge. Philip Boxer and Barry Palmer, in one of the few pieces I have been able to find on consultancy and epistemology, describe a series of research workshops they conducted in which they "were not primarily concerned with consultancy techniques, but with the ethical and epistemological assumptions which shape what they do".[32] Following Sohein and Mintzberg they distinguish between three basic positions which they represented in a diagram reminiscent of Joharis' Window (See Figure 9:4). They describe these positions as follows.

- *Bird*: the position of the consultant as expert, who supplies know-how which he or she is believed by the client to have, to solve a problem as identified by the client. (The term is mildly derogatory: the bird flies in and flies out again, leaving behind a solution to what is assumed by both consultant and client to be a known problem – a solution which, as long as the problem persists, may or may not prove to be welcome.)

- *Guru*: the position of one who is asked by the client to use his or her insight and theory to define what the "real" problem is behind the "presenting problem" identified by the client, and to formulate what can be done about it. (Schein calls this the doctor-patient model, in which the process of diagnosis as well as the "cure" are prescribed by the consultant.)

- *Fool*: the position of the consultant who Schein called the process consultant. Here the client accepts the process of diagnosis of what the "real" problem is as being problematic. In response to the "identified problem" put forward by the client, the fool, like the client, accepts not knowing what the "real" problem and its solution are, and is prepared to work with the client in a shared ignorance, learning with him or her the hard way how things can be different

- Although the *blank* position is one where someone can be providing a solution to a problem someone else has defined, it is not really a consultancy mode, though it is not unknown in practice.[33]

For Boxer and Palmer these form a repertoire of positions, Consultants may move between these positions during the course of a consultancy assignment: paths are traced between the quadrants in and through consultancy processes. Deciding which position to adopt "poses epistemological and ethical problems. What is the status of the knowledge which we bring to, or generate during, this work. Or if, as we believe, we can have no certain knowledge or unquestionable theoretical framework, what is our justification for offering our services and accepting people's money?".[34]
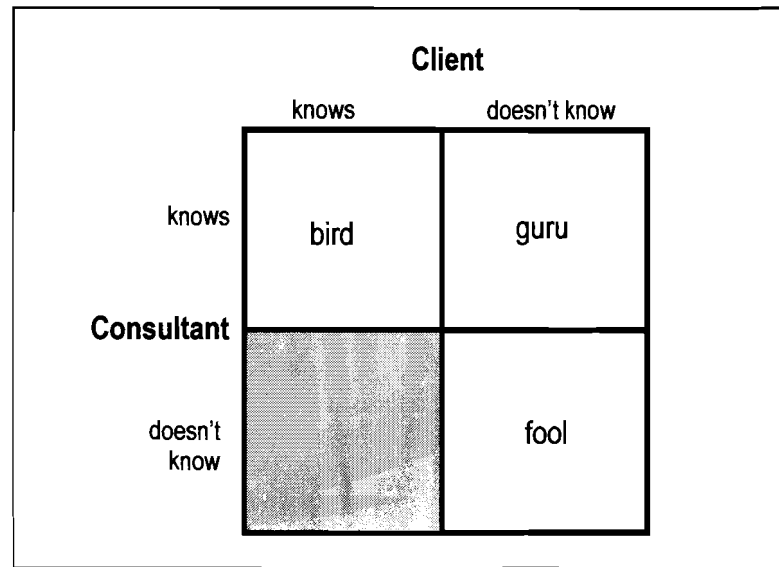
|  | **Client** | |
|---|---|---|
|  | knows | doesn't know |
| **knows** | bird | guru |
| **Consultant** | | |
| **doesn't know** | | fool |

**Figure 9:4: Consultancy Positions and Associated Knowledge**

Their research of the fool position led them to conclude that they "had shared something of the problematic nature of the practice of consulting and a way of working with it".[35] However this may be, they had identified critical alternative epistemological positions and classified choices to be made. Also, they had demonstrated that the epistemological approaches of consultants and consultors need to be consonant with the nature of the knowledge with which they are dealing and their convictions about how they see themselves as consultants and their relationships with consultors. Clearly, there are several possibilities of dysfunctional mismatches. Epistemological understanding is vital to consultancy, not least because it makes for informed choices of approach. And the epistemological approach is as critical as the epistemology of the knowledge used. They must be in harmony and tandem.

The importance of approach and position is underlined by Fraser Watts and Mark Williams. Commenting on the nature of forms of knowing they say "style is possibly more important than content".[36] Gareth Morgan in *Images of Organizations*, says, "I believe in a position that attempts to recognize the paradox that reality is simultaneously subjective and objective. We *engage* objective realities subjectively by putting ourselves in what we 'see', in a way that actually influences what we see". (Italics are Morgan's). The "process can be understood as one of 'engagement' and 'co-production', involving both subjective construction and concrete interactions between real 'others'".[37] This is an interesting observation about the significance of empathic knowing and the ways in which people and organizations acquire holistic minds. Approaches and the processes they engender have important epistemological connotations for consultancy.

## 4. Knowledge Representations and their use in Consultancy

Elements of knowledge are present in consultancies through what have been described as "knowledge representations" (KR) by Randall Davis, Howard Shrobe and Peter Szolovits. They say that the nature of knowledge representations are best understood in terms of five fundamental roles they play.[38] Using their basic definitions these roles are described below with some references to consultancy praxis.

*(a) A KR is a surrogate,* "a substitute for the thing itself", which enables reasoning processes which go on internally about things which "exist only externally". It "functions as a surrogate inside the reasoner, a stand-in for the things that exist in the world". Equally, I believe, knowledge representations, are surrogates for such things as feelings, ideas, visions that exist *within* people. However, whether knowledge representations are about things objective to those using them or subjective, they are surrogates. Consultors and consultants can and do use knowledge representations to study both things which are external and internal to them. Knowledge representations are presented in consultancy work in many different ways: orally; through the written word; through diagrams, charts, models; through the use of images and metaphors; through non-verbal communications; through the expression of emotion.

Several things follow for consultancies to be effective. *First,* knowledge representations must not be confused with the entities they represent. And it is all too easy to do so unconsciously when the representation evokes the essence of the thing itself. Distinguishing can be tricky especially when what is represented and its representation exist in the same subject. Sharing knowledge representations in consultations involves consultors and consultants projecting them beyond the confines of their own subjectivities into a domain where they can be considered objectively and subjectively by themselves and others. *Second,* important questions are, "How close is the surrogate to the real thing? What attributes of the original does it capture and make explicit, and which does it omit?" And in considering these questions it is necessary to remember that "Perfect fidelity is generally impossible in practice and in principle...*completely accurate (original)* representations of an object is the object itself". Continually, therefore, we deal with imperfect surrogates that can distort and lie about the limitless complexities of the realities they genuinely seek to represent. Sources of error are inbuilt. Taking these things seriously is essential to good consultancy praxis. *Third,* in consultancy practice, knowledge representations are used to determine inward personal action and action in the world. Reasoning itself is in part a surrogate for such action. *Fourth,* even with sound reasoning and the proper use of knowledge representations, mistakes can be made.[39]

*(b) A KR is unavoidably and usefully a set of ontological commitments* which determine how, in this case, a consultor or a consultant thinks about the world. This indicates basic commitments and the criteria used to select the material used to form and shape their representations.[40] Davis says, "The commitments are in fact a strong pair of glasses that determine what we can see, bringing some part of the world [I would add, and or our inner thoughts and feelings] into sharp focus, at the expense of blurring other parts".[41] Consequently there are representations within representations.

*(c) A KR is a fragmentary theory of intelligent reasoning.* "This role comes about because the initial conception of a representation is typically motivated by some insight indicating how people reason intelligently, or by some belief about what it means to reason intelligently at all".[42] This reasoning is expressed in three components of a representation: (i) the representation's fundamental conception of intelligence; (ii) the set of inferences the representation sanctions; (iii) the set of inferences it recommends.[43] These things take us to the "heart of a representation's spirit and mindset; knowing its position about these issues tells us a great deal about it".[44]

Davis distinguishes and discusses five notions of what constitutes intelligent reasoning. The *first* is the assumption derived from mathematical logic that intelligent reasoning is some variety of formal calculation, typically deductive. A *second* is a view rooted in psychology which sees reasoning as a characteristic human behaviour. A *third*, a view rooted in biology, sees intelligent reasoning as characteristic stimulus/response behaviour. A *fourth* is that intelligent reasoning is "obeying the axioms of probability theory". A *fifth* view from economics is that intelligent reasoning is defined by adherence to the tenents of utility theory.[45] Exploring these things led Davis to remind us that whilst his paper is about "knowledge representation, ... it is also a theory of thinking".[46]

So, KR's are ways into theories of thinking to which consultants and consultors are committed, often unconsciously. Identifying and working at these theories can be an important part of consultancy. Closely related are the theories of thinking upon which forms of consultancy in use are based.

*(d) A KR is a medium for efficient computation.* "From a purely mechanistic view, reasoning in machines and (somewhat more debatably, in people) is a computational process. Simply put, to use a representation we must compute with it. As a result questions about computational efficiency are inevitably central to the notion of representation".[47] Guidance in organizing information in consultancy helps to compute it in ways which facilitate the analysis and design of human work situations, projects and problems.

*(e) A KR is a medium of expression and communication* for use by us, i.e., a language in which we say things about the world and ourselves. And that, says Davis:

> ...presents two important sets of questions. One set is familiar: How well does the representation function as a medium of expression? How general is it? How precise? Does it provide expressive adequacy? etc.

> An important question less often discussed is, How well does it function as a medium of communication? That is, how easy is it for *us* to "talk" or think in that language? What kinds of things are easily said in the language and what kinds of things are so difficult as to be pragmatically impossible?

> Note that the questions here are of the form "how easy is it?" rather than "can we?" This is a language we must use, so things that are possible in principle are useful but insufficient; the real question is one of pragmatic utility. If the representation makes things possible but not easy, then as

real users we may never know whether we have misunderstood the representation and just do not know how to use it, or it truly cannot express some things we would like to say. A representation is the language in which we communicate, hence we must be able to speak it without heroic effort.[48]

All this is clearly important for consultancy praxis.

Having established these roles Davis, Shrobe and Szolovits reflect on the consequences for research and practice and make the following points. They urge that all roles should be kept in mind when creating and using representational languages and particularly their use in "capturing the complexity of the real world". They advocate the combination of representations to get the broader view. They underline the value and importance of making explicit the "spirit" of representations, i.e., the ideas and inspirations that lie behind the representations.[49] One of their conclusions is particularly pertinent to the theme of this chapter:

> At various times in the development of the field, the suggestion has been made that we ought to view knowledge representation in purely epistemologic (sic) terms, i.e., take the singular role of representation to be conveying knowledge content.... As we noted earlier, epistemology matters, but it is not the whole of the matter. Representation and reasoning are inextricably intertwined: we cannot talk about one without also, unavoidably, discussing the other. We argue as well that the attempt to deal with representation as knowledge content alone leads to an incomplete conception of the task of building an intelligent reasoner.[50]

All this seems to me to provide ways into the understanding of knowledge used in consultancy praxis and its proper use whilst illuminating epistemological questions.

## 5. Interaction of Knowledge Representations and Epistemologies in Consultancies

In relation to the work in which they are engaged consultors and consultants variously relate to particular bodies of knowledge and their associated epistemologies. They, consultors and consultants, that is, may represent similar or different bodies of knowledge and epistemological positions. Similarly their understanding of the nature of these things may vary greatly and so might the importance they attach to them. All of these things they bring to consultations through knowledge representations of one kind or another. The very nature of consultancy means that they are brought into close proximity and, given collaborative openness between consultors and consultants, they intercept, interrelate and interact. Against this background this section notes characteristics of working stations (or settings) variously located in the periods before, during and after consultancy sessions with particular reference to the consultor.

*Work Station A: before consultancy sessions:* At this point consultors are going about their work as practitioners in their own situations using the knowledge and knowledge representations available to them in their own ways within a generally assumed understanding of the subject matter and context. Epistemological issues will not normally be addressed rigorously even by reflective practitioners.

*Work Station B: preparing for consultancy sessions:* This is the point at which consultors prepare for consultancy sessions by deciding how to depict to consultants, who may or may not know their situation, the things about which they wish to consult. Consciously or unconsciously, formally or informally they are attempting the difficult task of formulating knowledge representations (K R's) which communicate effectively to those beyond the direct experience of the situation, its ethos and nuances. Ideally the K R's reflect the bodies of knowledge upon which consultor's draw and their epistemologies as well as profile their working situation.

The epistemological bases of consultors takes on myriad forms. No attempt is made here to survey them although knowledge of them provides important information for consultants. Here we concentrate on the epistemologies of consultancy knowledge and praxis and the way they are used by consultants to help consultors to be more creative, effective and efficient through praxis that is epistemologically sound.

*Work Station C: consultancy session in progress:* The outcome of the preparations now finds expression in the consultancy working relationship. Hopefully it comes to life. At this point, in a responsive mode, the consultant's knowledge, praxis and epistemology kick in. However, it could have been operative at station B if, for instance, the consultant had suggested as they often do, the form the representation should take. Now using their own praxis, consultants work with consultors on their representations to form a knowledge base and agreed knowledge representations most likely to facilitate effective consultative engagement. To do this consultants attend carefully to consultors, their representations and their epistemologies and to anything that is relevant in their own bodies of knowledge and epistemologies. Their consultancy praxis determines how they do this and how they proceed to analyse, design and plan with consultors. These processes and the stages and procedures associated with them are variously organized and defined in different consultancy models. To some extent distinctions between them are artificial or arbitrary because, for example, clarification of work situations and epistemologies can be operative throughout all of this part of the process.

The handling of the interaction and especially any conflict between the consultor's and the consultant's epistemology is a significant but much neglected feature of consultancy processes. Changes in the consultor's epistemology, however small, may well be *the* critical output of the consultancy and all that is necessary to improve the consultor's and the consultant's praxis dramatically. For instance, through the SSM consultancy model of consultancy, they may see the epistemological significance of the distinction between "soft and "hard" systems methodology. (cf Chapter Three, Model One). Facilitating such changes requires great care and consultancy skill because it is essential to avoid action plans which are based on an epistemology (the consultant's for instance) which the consultor has not

understood or grasped or adopted. Such a design fault seriously compromises the possibility of creativity.

*Work Station D: after consultancy sessions:* This is the situation when consultors have resumed their work possibly with new practical ideas and greater conceptual clarity about their knowledge bases and working epistemologies and action they must take in relation to revising or developing them. This will help them in the task which completes a consultancy cycle: formulating knowledge presentations which enable them, consultors that is, to communicate the outcome of consultancies to their colleagues and those with whom they work. These knowledge representations could be described as "meta cognitions" as they are at a higher level of abstraction to the specifics they represent. So, what starts with communicating relevant aspects of the consultor's working situation to consultants concludes by communicating relevant aspects of the consultancy to consultor's themselves and by them to their workforces.

These work situations are represented in Figure 9:5 (overleaf) which takes the form of a hermeneutical circle.

Changes can occur in the understanding and approaches to knowledge bases and epistemologies. Such changes in consultors-and consultants-can be amongst the most significant consultancy outcomes. Amongst other things they facilitate the formulation of more creative knowledge presentations.

The knowledge in play is, as noted above, of course, selected by consultors and consultants from much larger bodies of knowledge. The rationale of consultancy has epistemological connotations. There can be, and generally is, more than one form of epistemology operative in consultations and this can cause conflict or confusion or creative interaction.
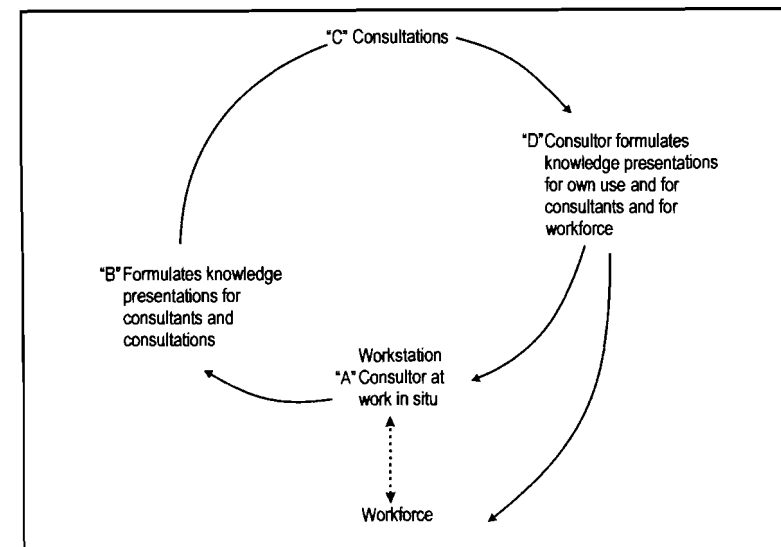


**Figure 9:5: Knowledge Representations in Operation**

## 6. Consultancy as Hermeneutics

"Consultancy as hermeneutics" was suggested to me by David Lyall's examination of "pastoral care as hermeneutics".[51] Hermeneutics, "the branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation especially of scripture or literary texts" (Concise Oxford Dictionary, Ninth Edition), is a well established discipline vigorously pursued in many ways. Lyall shows that there has "been a great broadening in the scope of hermeneutics, with attempts to devise methods of interpreting contemporary situations as well as ancient texts".[52] An important concept to those engaged in this movement is summed up in the phrase, "living human documents".[53] A similar phrase, "documents of life", is in common currency in relation to qualitative research into human behaviour.[54] Hermeneutics when applied to pastoral care or to consultancy involves, I suggest, working with people on their lives and work or on the narratives of their lives through treating them as "living human documents".[55] According to Lyall prominent scholars in the field of pastoral care "have been particularly creative in taking methods first applied to the interpretation of written texts and applying them to the task of finding of meaning in the stories which embody human experience and pastoral activity".[56] David Capps, following Paul Ricoeur, for instance, "has pointed out significant parallels between meaningful (as opposed to random) human action and written texts". He argues that, like written texts, meaningful action:

- leaves its mark;
- has unintended consequences;
- creates a world;
- i always open to reinterpretation.[57]

Writing about hermeneutics and psychoanalytic praxis, Andre Haynall, makes interesting points on the discussion about epistemology of consultancy generally and that of psychoanalytical and psychodynamic models in particular (see Chapter Seven). He uses a definition by Rorty (1980), "hermeneutics is the study of an abnormal discourse (that which does not deliver up its meaning immediately, a mystery text) from the point of view of some normal discourse - an attempt to make sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it". He suggests that connections are established by examining abnormal discourses through "interrogative interpretations". Thus, he says, hermeneutics "becomes the study of the "unfamiliar" in order to make it familiar, comprehensible". He argues that before Schleiermacher "hermeneutics was the science of texts; with him, it became an attempt by a member of a given culture to *understand the experience of another*". He suggests that as participants in psychoanalysis are enclosed their own systems of reference they find difficulty in understanding the more intimate depths and references of the other. He concludes:

> So when we talk about hermeneutics in psychoanalysis, we are, of necessity, also talking about *intimacy* with another, empathic understanding, being in tune [*Einfuhlung*], which in turn is expressed in the analyst's words. Interpretations cannot, therefore, be separated from empathic identification, from countertransference, nor can hermeneutics be dissociated from the *emotional experience* surrounding the words.[58] (Haynal's italics)

However, whilst there seems to be potential in viewing consultancy praxis as a hermeneutical activity it needs to be tested out. One way of doing so would be to research the application to consultancy praxis of the approaches and methods used in contemporary hermeneutics.[59]

## 7. Epistemology and Hermeneutics

An appropriate way to complete the circle of this chapter seems to be by notes about relationships between epistemology and hermeneutics. The following quotations do that admirably. They are both from *The Other Side of Listening: A Philosophy of Listening* by Gemma Corradi Fiumara.

> If hermeneutics points to an attempt to explore what can only be understood with difficulty, and epistemology represents the study of ways in which we actually know, one might consider the former as the discipline of humanistic research and the latter as the discipline of the 'natural' sciences. This distinction, however, may turn out to be extrinsic and superficial in as much as epistemology might refer to a method used in the *normal* sciences – whatever the object of study – and hermeneutics might refer to a method used in those fields in which "normality" has not (yet) been attained or is unattainable. The dynamics of exclusion or excommunication, moreover, spring more easily from the normal sciences than from research into fields that are dense with "anomalies".[60]

> Epistemology, on the one hand, is supposed to be occupied with "real" cognitive problems of major significance, those problems in which our indissoluble bonds with "rationality" are unfolded for examination; hermeneutics, on the other hand, should be concerned with everything that is left. As Rorty suggest, whatever can not be rendered commensurable with such logically accepted standards seems to end up by being relegated into the area of the merely "subjective", there to be examined by the hermeneutic disciplines. In our opinion, however, we are not dealing with a polarization between rational objectivity and irrational subjectivity so much as with a distinction between different types of investigation; on the one hand "established philosophy" (in the Kuhnian sense) and, on the other, less customary and less institutionalised areas of research.[61]

## Postscript

After mulling over an early draft of this chapter, my staff colleague on the Consultancy, Mission and Ministry course referred to earlier, The Revd David Dadswell of Macdonald Associates Consultancy (see Chapter Five), wrote the following piece which he entitled: *Knowing the problem: Cognitive ability.* It is a fitting postscript because it is a corrective: consultancy rises and falls not simply on what is known and represented adequately but on the ability of consultants and consultors to use creatively the knowledge they have.

> If consultancy is seen as a collaborative process of problem solving, there is a significant issue around how well the consultant and the consultor can frame the problem they are looking to solve. Problems have inherent in

them different levels of complexity. Problems become more complex when they have more variables, which are less tangible, more interlinked, and there is greater ambiguity and uncertainty further into the future. This raises the issue of whether the consultant and/or the consultor can handle intellectually the complexity - the range of variables, unknowns and their complex interactions - which is needed both to understand the problem and to generate possible solutions.

In psychological terms this depends on their cognitive ability. Cognitive ability refers to the intellectual or cognitive qualities of an individual in terms of the way that person mentally processes information about a variable, or the relationships between two or more variables. This enables people to construct views of the world around them, classify and analyse problems, and fashion methods for interacting with that world. Cognitive ability is, therefore, not the possession of a body of knowledge - it is an individual's capacity to acquire and apply knowledge. It will interact helpfully or unhelpfully with the individual's education, experience, skills and already existing knowledge but if an individual does not have the cognitive ability to model and analyse a problem at the appropriate level, no amount of experience will produce a satisfactory analysis and consequent strategy.

If one or both of the parties in the consultancy cannot work at the appropriate level, it is difficult to know all that needs to be known about the problem. A problem in identifying that this is a problem is that other factors can mask this basic lack of ability. They may be working really hard at the problem; they may have had considerable experience in this area and can use a lot of technical terms about the issue; or their social interaction may feel very effective and affirming. All these features may be very important in helping the consultancy to be productive but, if there is a lack of the necessary cognitive ability to understand the problem and the outworking of its possible solutions, the result of the consultancy will often be to produce frustration or strategies that simply do not work well enough if at all.

Addressing this issue demands a high level of self-knowledge, honesty and courage in setting up a consultancy contract and in the periodic reviews about the progress of the work together. This is particularly a professional and ethical issue for the consultant who needs to consider carefully whether they have the basic capability to fulfil the role of consultant. For the consultor, if they appear not to have the cognitive ability to address the problem in their role, the issue may be a larger one of whether they can fulfil the demands of the job they may be employed in.

## References and Notes

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2. McCarthy, John *What is Artificial Intelligence* Revised March 29th 2003 (http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/)
3. Reason, Peter (ed) (1988) *Human Inquiry in Action: Developments in New Paradigm Research* (Sage Publications) p4 and p42
4. ibid., p42
5. Watts, Fraser and Williams Mark (1988) *The Psychology of Religious Knowing* (Cambridge University Press) pp7, 98-102, 105, 106 and 108
6. ibid; cf pp14ff, 56, 91ff, 102f and104
7. ibid., p 46
8. ibid; pp5, 46 and 63. See Chapter Six of this book, Model One, Section III.1 See also Lovell, George (2000) *Consultancy, Ministry and Mission: A Handbook for Practitioners and Work Consultants in Christian Organizations* (Burns and Oates) pp51ff, especially 59-60 and 149.
9. ibid., p152
10. Reason op cit. pp4 & 42. Reason refers to John Heron's "extended epistemology involving propositional, practical and experimental knowledge". p229
11. Reason op cit pp4 and 42
12. Watts & Williams op cit p3
13. Reason op cit p37
14. Morgan, Gareth (1986) *Images of Organizations* (Sage Publications) p383
15. cf Reason op cit p12
16. Smail, David (1984) *Illusion and Reality: The Meaning of Anxiety* (J M Dent and Sons Ltd.) p34 et al
17. Lovell, George (1994) *Analysis and Design: A Handbook for Practitioners and Consultants in Church and Community Work* (Burns and Oates) pp263-265 where there is a discussion of Smail's ideas and their application to work with people.
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19. Morgan, Gareth op cit, p 339
20. Watts and Williams op cit p151
21. ibid., p152
22. ibid., pp6, 38, 50ff, and 92
23. ibid., pp6 and 92
24. ibid., p 58
25. ibid., p152
26. ibid., pp2, 3 and 6
27. ibid., p151
28. ibid., p152
29. ibid., p153
30. cf Lovell, George (2000) op cit pp257-60. Watts and Williams op cit pp7, 98-102, 105, 106 and 108.
31. This model is adapted from one presented by A W Ghent in "The Logic of Experimental Design", *Bioscience*, 16:17-22, 1966 as quoted by Bill McKelvey in *Organizational Systematics: Taxonomy, Evolution and Classification* (University of California Press, 1982) p19. It is discussed in *Consultancy, Ministry and Mission* p 78.
32. A section by Philip Boxer and Barry Palmer entitled "Meeting the Challenge of the Case" in Casemore, Roger; Dyos, Gail; Eden, Angela; Kellner, Kamil; McAuley, John; Moss, Stephen (Eds) (1994) *What Makes Consultancy Work – understanding the dynamics* (South Bank University Press) pp358-371.
33. ibid., p359
34. ibid., p358
35. ibid., p371
36. Watts and Williams op cit p151

37.    Gareth Morgan op cit p382

38.    Davis, Randall; Schrobe, Howard; Szolovits, Peter "What is a Knowledge Representation?"    A 17 page article, http://medg.lcs.mit.edu/ftp/psz/k-rep.htm/ dated 09/06/03.  This section draws extensively upon this article.

39.    ibid; the quotations in this paragraph are from p3.

40.    ibid., pp2 and 4-5

41.    ibid., p4

42.    ibid., p5

43.    ibid., p 2

44.    ibid., p6

45.    ibid., pp6-10

46.    ibid., p9

47.    ibid., pp2 and 10-11

48.    ibid., p11 cf p2

49.    ibid., pp11 and 12

50.    ibid., p13

51.    Lyall, David (2001) *Integrity of Pastoral Care* (SPCK) pp49-62

52.    ibid., pp49f

53.    ibid., p50

54.    54.cf Plummer, Ken (1983) *Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method* (London, Unwin Hyman)

55.    Bernard Dauenhauer suggests that the implications of Ricoeur's conceptions of discourse and action come together in a particularly striking way in his discussions of what he calls the narrative unity of a person's life, "personal identity is a narrative identity".    See http://plato.stamford.edu/entries/ricoeur in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Paul Ricoeur Nov.11 2002 version, see sections 3.1 and 3.4.

56.    Lyall op cit., p50 et al

57.    ibid., pp50-55

58.    Haynall, Andre (1993) *Psychoanalysis and the Sciences: Epistemology – History* (Karnac Books, website, www.karnacbooks.com) p79

59.    For instance, an increasing broad band of approaches and methods are adopted and used in contemporary Biblical hermeneutics.  They include: literacy, historical and redaction criticism including contextual and non-contextual approaches; interpretation through language, the new (Heideggarian) hermeneutic; canonical criticism; reader–response criticisms.  See, for example: Brown, Raymond, E.; Fitzmyer, Joseph A.; Murphy, Roland. E. (Editors) (1995) *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* Geoffrey Chapman) pp1146-1165 et al.

60.    Fiumara, Gemma, Corradi (1990) *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening* (Routledge, London and New York) p51

61.    ibid., pp40-41 which is a section on "interpretative listening and epistemology".