

# “The client is always right”

## How PR consultants respond to institutional pluralism

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**Abstract:** This thesis advances the fairly nascent literature on how individuals respond to institutional pluralism by studying how Public Relations (PR) consultants relate to their clients. Consultants in general – and PR consultants in particular – act in a unique institutional context, where they must act in consideration of each client's institutional logic, as well as their own. Despite this fact, and the ubiquity of consultants in organizational life and the broader academic literature, they have received strikingly little attention within the institutional logics literature. To address this gap, we conduct a qualitative study of PR consultants in Sweden. We find that PR consultants actively strive to understand client logics, while remaining at an arm's length distance. This intermediary closeness enables them to combine their own logic with the client's logic through surface-level adaptation practices, and thereby steer the client to action.

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**Keywords:** institutional logics, institutional pluralism, microfoundations of logics, individual-level responses, public relations consultants

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# Glossary

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<b>Public Relations (PR) consulting</b>	“Services provided by consultants to other organizational clients who wish to promote their business through communicating indirectly with relevant actor collectives such as owners, clients and policy makers, mainly via raising public opinion in non-paid media channels, but also through direct interaction.” (Tyllström, 2013, p. 50)
<b>Institutional logic</b>	“the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, assumptions, values, and beliefs by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their daily activity. (...) [Each logic thus provides] a set of assumptions and values, usually implicit, about how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed.” (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804)
<b>Institutional pluralism</b>	“Institutional pluralism is the situation faced by an organization that operates within multiple institutional spheres. If institutions are broadly understood as ‘the rules of the game’ that direct and circumscribe organizational behavior, then the organization confronting institutional pluralism plays in two or more games at the same time.” (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 2)
<b>State logic</b>	An ideal-type institutional logic, denoting the set of assumptions, values and beliefs associated with public organizations. This includes democratic participation as the source of legitimacy, and increasing community good as the basis for strategy. The state logic provides the set of assumptions through which our respondents’ public-sector clients perceive meaning and value (Thornton et al., 2012; see appendix 1).
<b>Corporate logic</b>	An ideal-type institutional logic associated with corporations. This includes hierarchy as a critical narrative for interpreting organizational reality, the market position of the firm as the source of legitimacy, and top management as the source of authority. The corporate logic provides the set of assumptions through which our respondents’ private-sector clients perceive meaning and value (Thornton et al., 2012; see appendix 1).

<b>Professional logic</b>	An ideal-type institutional logic shared by professionals – in our case PR consultants. Professionals derive their identity from the quality of their craft and their personal reputation – their identity depends on their performance as a professional, as defined by the logic. The professional logic provides the set of assumptions through which our respondents themselves perceive meaning and value (Thornton et al., 2012; see appendix 1).
<b>Public clients</b>	Organizations in the Swedish public sector. Includes public administrative agencies (Sw. <i>förvaltningsmyndigheter</i> ), counties and municipalities, as well as certain other organizations such as law courts and state-operated companies (Sw. <i>affärsverk</i> ) (Statskontoret, 2005, 2017). Excludes companies organized in corporate form, e.g. LLCs, even if majority-owned by the public sector.
<b>Private clients</b>	Organizations in the Swedish private sector. Includes all companies organized in corporate form, e.g. LLCs, even if majority-owned by the public sector (Statskontoret, 2005, 2017). Excludes not-for-profit companies and NGOs.

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# 1. Introduction

*“The history of PR is (...) a history of a battle for what is reality and how people will see and understand reality.” – Stuart Ewen, professor of media studies (1999)*

## 1.1 Theoretical purpose

Institutional logics are the “rules of the game” that shape how people (and organizations) think and behave within different spheres of society, such as family, work and church (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 2; cf. Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). In recent years, institutional scholars have shown a growing interest in the co-existence of multiple institutional logics – a phenomenon called institutional pluralism<sup>1</sup> (Jaumier et al., 2017; Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010). Scholars argue that institutional pluralism is becoming increasingly prevalent, and that many organizations today face demands from multiple institutional logics (Battilana et al., 2017; Pache & Santos, 2013a; Kraatz & Block, 2008). A significant amount of research has been conducted on organizational-level responses to institutional pluralism (cf. Greenwood et al., 2011), but so far, little attention has been paid to the way in which individuals experience pluralism and enact responses. Only in recent years, scholars have increasingly become aware that pluralism is a concern also for individuals (Jaumier et al., 2017; Pache & Santos, 2013a). The field of individual-level responses to institutional pluralism is growing, but remains nascent (Pache & Santos, 2013a; Brandl & Bullinger, 2017), and much research remains to be done (Jaumier et al., 2017).

Consultants act in a unique institutional context. They move between different clients as part of their fundamental role. In each engagement, they are supposed to “perceive the world, interpret it, and act on it in a way that best serves their clients’ interests” – while at the same time meeting demands from their own firm (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2012, p. 438). In other words, consultants must act in consideration of the institutional logic(s) of each client, as well as their own firm. This is particularly true for Public Relations (PR) consultants, whose role is to support clients in increasing legitimacy among referent groups (Tyllström, 2013) such as customers, politicians, NGOs and the media. This implies an immediate need to understand what behaviors are considered appropriate in the client’s context, i.e. their institutional logic (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Since clients continually replace each other, the consultancy setting is characterized by a dynamic environment of multiple client logics, surrounding a stable environment within the consultancy firm – a unique form of institutional pluralism.

However, despite the ubiquity of consultants in organizational life and the broader academic literature (for reviews, see Nikolova & Devinney, 2012; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2012), the consultancy phenomenon has received strikingly little attention within organizational institutionalism, and particularly the logics literature. In the most established conceptualization, they are treated in an instrumentalized way – as carriers of ideas (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002) – rather than as a human organizational phenomenon worthy of study in its own right (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on how institutional pluralism relates to institutional complexity, see section 2.1.2.



In light of this research gap, this thesis explores how PR consultants respond to institutional pluralism on the individual level, by shedding light on how they respond to clients who are embedded in diverse institutional contexts.

## 1.2 Practical relevance

In addition to the theoretical purpose, by studying PR consultants, we shed light on an industry that is large, growing – and distrusted. The global PR consulting industry<sup>2</sup> is valued at USD 14.2 billion today, and is forecast to grow to USD 19.3 billion in 2020 (The Holmes Report, 2016). In 2011, the Swedish PR consulting industry was valued at EUR 150 million (Tyllström, 2013). Despite substantial efforts to communicate the value of PR services to organizations and society, the industry remains treated with suspicion and distrust (Grandien, 2017; Tyllström, 2013; Larsson, 2007). Media representations can be summarized as “a fairly consistent picture of PR as a somewhat shady practice of manipulation and lies at worst, image and reputation management at best” (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013, p. 9). This is reflected in the general public. In Sweden, more than half of participants in general surveys express poor or little trust in PR consultants (Larsson, 2007). There is also a negative societal discourse about consultants in general, and especially about their work in the Swedish public sector – including an ongoing investigation by the Swedish National Audit Office, who have raised explicit concerns about the dearth of existing empirical knowledge (Riksrevisionen, 2017).

Throughout these critical accounts, and indeed most academic work, the voices of the PR consultants themselves are notably rare (for exceptions, see Hou, 2016; von Platen, 2016). By studying how PR consultants work with multiple kinds of clients, through the lens of institutional pluralism – and giving voice to our participants – we open a window through which observers can better judge the legitimacy of their concerns about the profession.

## 1.3 Research question

To achieve the aims stated above, this thesis is guided by the following research question:

**How do individual PR consultants respond to the institutional pluralism that arises between themselves and clients who are embedded in different institutional contexts?**

## 1.4 Demarcations and assumptions

Within the given time frame, certain demarcations were necessary in order to conduct a meaningful qualitative study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, the empirical study is limited to Sweden. This ensured physical proximity to our informants, which allowed for deeper immersion in the study. It also allowed us to draw on the professional networks of one of the authors. Second, we investigate the research question using clients in the public sector and the private sector (see glossary) as proxies for different institutional contexts. This was partly since consultant-client confidentiality precludes detailed discussion of individual clients, but mainly for analytical traction: it is established in previous

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<sup>2</sup> Defined in The Holmes Report (2016) as the “PR agency industry”.

literature that these spheres take influence from different institutional logics, often understood through the ideal types of the *state logic* and *corporate logic* (Thornton et al., 2012; Thornton, 2004; Friedland & Alford, 1991). Hence, we can focus less on identifying the logics at play, and instead delve deeper into how PR consultants respond to them. We acknowledge that this is a simplification: both the public and private sector are heterogeneous and encompass many different logics at the field and organizational levels. Even so, we argue that the state and corporate logics contribute to enough differentiation to make the distinction meaningful also at the individual level of analysis. Both sectors are included because we are interested in how PR consultants generally respond to client logics, rather than to a single, sector-specific client logic.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

*In this section, we review the theoretical foundation of our thesis (2.1) and demarcate the research gap (2.2). Next, we present the theoretical and analytical framework used to address this gap and answer the research question (2.3).*

### 2.1 Theoretical foundation

As visualized in figure 1, this section reviews the necessary fields for demarcating the research gap, and providing the requisite backdrop for the theoretical framework in section 2.3. In accordance with our research question, the review is limited to the field of institutional logics, since this is the literature that we will use, and aim to advance. This section first provides an introduction to institutional logics (2.1.1) and institutional pluralism (2.1.2). It then narrows in on the research gap by reviewing the literature on individual-level responses to institutional pluralism (2.1.3). Finally, it reviews the limited existing literature on consultants in general, and PR consultants in particular, within the logics field (2.1.4).

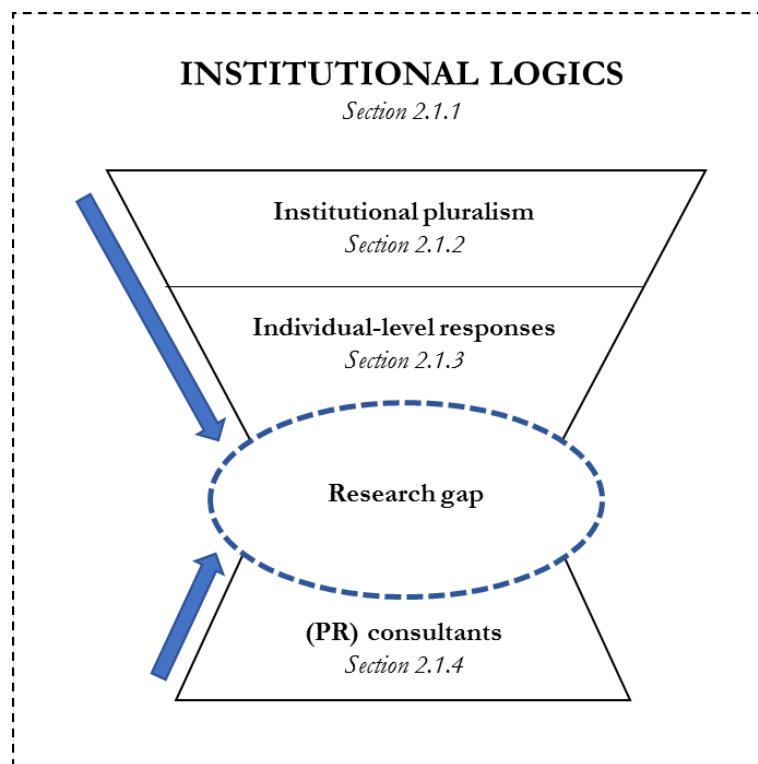


Figure 1: Theoretical fields reviewed in this section.

#### 2.1.1 Introduction to institutional logics

The theoretical perspective of *institutional logics* (henceforth: logics), which was first introduced in a seminal article by Friedland & Alford (1991), has become a key area of research within organizational institutionalism. Over 700 articles have been published with logics as a main topic, with thousands more citing the concept, and this literature has expanded at an accelerating pace ever since interest in

the area started exploding in 2011-12 (Ocasio et al., 2017). While this has resulted in rapid accumulation of knowledge, it has also entailed divergence – and sometimes confusion – about the theoretical perspective, including its key concepts and applications (Ocasio et al., 2017). For this reason, we first provide a brief overview and a few clarifications. According to Thornton and Ocasio (1999), in one of the most commonly cited definitions, logics are:

“the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, assumptions, values, and beliefs by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their daily activity. (...) [Each logic thus provides] a set of assumptions and values, usually implicit, about how to interpret organizational reality, what constitutes appropriate behavior, and how to succeed.” (p. 804)

As such, logics are distinct from theories, frames, narratives, practices, and categories – all of which are building blocks for logics, but not logics in their own right (Thornton et al., 2012; Ocasio et al., 2015). Logics are also distinct from their analytical representations, most notably *ideal types* (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton, 2004; Thornton et al., 2012). Ideal types only constitute a particular method for analyzing logics (cf. Weber, 1978 [1922]), a distinction that is commonly misunderstood (Ocasio et al., 2017).

Building from Friedland and Alford (1991), Thornton et al. (2012, p. 54) propose a typology of societal-level, “cornerstone” ideal-type logics which remains foundational to current theorizing: *family, community, religion, market, state, profession* and *corporation*. These denote the values, beliefs and assumptions that characterize each domain. For example, the family logic informs what constitutes appropriate behavior in the family sphere of life, and so on.

## 2.1.2 Institutional pluralism

Complying with the prescriptions of institutional logics confers social legitimacy, while deviating from them is socially sanctioned (Ingram & Clay, 2000; Rao et al., 2003). This encourages the stability and reproduction of logics, and contributes to homogenized, isomorphic<sup>3</sup> behaviors within organizational fields (Pache & Santos, 2013a). However, in addition, logics scholars build on the foundational proposition that organizational actors can be exposed to *multiple and sometimes competing logics*, enabling not only isomorphism, but also institutional heterogeneity, multiplicity, contestation and change, as organizations and individuals respond to competing institutional demands (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002). This is known as *institutional pluralism* (Kraatz & Block, 2017), also referred to as *logic multiplicity* (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Institutional pluralism thus refers to the co-existence of multiple, more-or-less complementary logics, which interact to produce a range of outcomes – from competition to cooperation (Ocasio et al., 2017). The prevalence of such pluralism has been theorized across various levels of analysis, including society, field and organization (e.g., respectively, Friedland & Alford, 1991; Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010). Scholars have also provided

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<sup>3</sup> Institutional isomorphism refers to processes of homogenization, particularly of formal organizational structures, as organizations adjust to their institutional environments to ensure legitimacy and survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

compelling empirical evidence for it (e.g. Lounsbury, 2007; Greenwood et al., 2010; McPherson & Sauder, 2013).

The logics literature has taken particular interest in the co-existence of multiple *competing* logics (e.g. Jay, 2013; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), which is often referred to as *institutional complexity* (Greenwood et al., 2011). This interest is also evident within a partly overlapping but distinct vein of research, *hybrid organizing* (Battilana et al., 2017), where scholars emphasize how values and practices from distinct (and often seemingly incompatible) field- or societal-level logics are instantiated within single, “hybrid” organizations (e.g. Pache & Santos, 2013b; Jay, 2013; Smets et al., 2015). In all, scholars emphasize that organizations of all types face increasingly pluralistic institutional environments (Battilana et al., 2017). For example, corporations increasingly engage in CSR (Margolis & Walsh, 2003), non-profits are pressured to commercialize (Galaskiewicz et al., 2006), and state-owned enterprises undergo marketization (Considine & Lewis, 2003).

Studies on how organizational actors respond to such pluralistic institutional demands have primarily focused on the organizational level of analysis (Pache & Santos, 2013a; McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Kraatz & Block, 2008), where various responses have been conceptualized (e.g. Oliver, 1991; Pache and Santos, 2010; Greenwood et al., 2011). Studies at the individual level are beginning to emerge, but much remains to be done (Brandl & Bullinger, 2017; Jaumier et al., 2017).

### 2.1.3 Individual-level responses to institutional pluralism

In contrast to the structurally deterministic, top-down view which characterizes its neo-institutionalist origins, the logics perspective assumes *embedded agency*: that logics exert both constraining and enabling influences on organizational and individual actors, and that these actors can exercise agency in forming, reproducing and transforming organizations (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Thus, the logics perspective fundamentally incorporates a cross-level emphasis – both top-down and bottom-up – in its research and theory work (Ocasio et al., 2017). At the same time, organizational institutionalism, including the logics perspective, has been criticized for suffering from a “people” problem (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006, p. 214) – in other words, for failing to adequately ground institutional phenomena in the behaviors and cognitions of individuals or groups of actors (Greenwood et al., 2017). In recent years, there has been a wave of logics research which aims to address this “people” problem by elaborating on the links between macro-level institutions and their micro-level foundations (e.g. Thornton et al., 2012), and thereby open the “black box” of logics at the individual level (Powell & Rerup, 2017).

Within this research agenda, a fairly nascent and diverse body of research focuses specifically on how individuals respond to institutional pluralism. Research spans over several fields, including institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; see e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Tracey et al., 2011), practice-driven institutionalism (Smets et al., 2017; see e.g. Smets et al., 2015; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013) and Scandinavian institutionalism (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017; see e.g. Blomgren & Waks, 2015).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this fairly nascent literature encompasses different underlying assumptions (Greenwood et al., 2017; Jaumier et al., 2017; Brandl & Bullinger, 2017). Particularly, studies are understood to vary in how much they ascribe individuals the ability to play with logics for strategic purposes – to what degree individuals are *socialized representatives* or *strategic users* of logics

(Greenwood et al., 2017; Jaumier et al., 2017; Brandl & Bullinger, 2017). Research that tends toward the socialized perspective emphasizes how individuals develop ties to particular logics, and how they refer to and enact these logics to various degrees (Brandl & Bullinger, 2017). The *strategic users* perspective does not deny that socialization plays a role in shaping an individual's ties to logics, but it also presumes that logics can be mobilized, or used as toolkits (Swidler, 1986), for accomplishing certain goals – often linked to personal advantage (Brandl & Bullinger, 2017).

While such a categorization is useful for understanding existing research, Greenwood et al. (2017, p. 11) caution that the underlying phenomenon is a “continuum of embedded discretion” – in line with the embedded agency assumption – and that the position of actors along this spectrum is likely to vary over time and by situation. Indeed, most existing research, whether tending towards socialization or strategic use, incorporates aspects of both, and current research is not necessarily incommensurable. Below, we use this framework to position, and discuss, key contributions within the field (table 1).

	<b>Socialized representatives</b>	<b>Strategic users</b>
Illustrative research	Thornton et al. (2012), Pache & Santos (2013a), Almandoz (2014), Marquis & Tilcsik (2013), Battilana & Dorado (2010)	McPherson & Sauder (2013), Smets & Jarzabkowski (2013), Smets et al. (2015), Voronov et al. (2013), Voronov & Yorks (2015)
Illustrative quotes	<p><i>“Prior involvement with institutional logics has shaped people’s assumptions and values. (...) Such conditioning transforms them into ‘carriers’ of those institutional influences”</i> (Almandoz, 2014, p. 443)</p> <p><i>“Embedded behavior, neither undersocialized nor oversocialized, implies individual agency, albeit subject to constraints. (...) Our model of agency does not, however, equate agency with interests, or self-seeking behavior. An individual’s agency is also guided by his or her social identities and identification”</i> (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 79)</p>	<p><i>“Available logics closely resemble tools that can be creatively employed by actors to achieve individual and organizational goals”</i> (McPherson &amp; Sauder, 2013, p. 165)</p> <p><i>“Competing institutional logics are not fixed in some structural order but are continuously and flexibly instantiated in the momentary processes by which individuals adjust to any given situation”</i> (Smets et al., 2015, p. 937)</p>

**Table 1: Two perspectives on individual responses to pluralism.** Adapted from Jaumier et al. (2017).

Within the *socialized* perspective, Thornton et al. (2012, p. 84) propose a seminal, comprehensive “microfoundations” model of the underlying mechanisms by which individuals relate to multiple logics. According to Thornton et al. (2012), individuals have embedded agency, and “learn multiple contrasting and often contradictory institutional logics through social interactions and socialization” (p. 83). Three mechanisms determine whether a certain logic will be activated: *availability*, the

knowledge and information an individual has pertaining to a certain logic; *accessibility*, the knowledge that comes to mind, determined by the cultural and situational context; and *activation*, whether this knowledge is actually used in social interaction, determined by the individual's focus of attention. Activated logics shape social interactions, which generate situated social structures and practices. These are then selected and retained through cultural evolutionary processes, ultimately resulting in the emergence of logics at the organizational, field or societal level. Building on Thornton et al.'s (2012) model, Pache and Santos (2013a) synthesized the existing literature on responses to institutional pluralism, and proposed that an individual's overall response to two competing logics is driven by their pre-existing, socialized adherence to these logics. Through a predictive model with five possible responses, Pache and Santos's (2013a) conceptualization transcended earlier, dichotomous assumptions that individuals either adhere to or resist logics, when in fact people can also be indifferent, or adhere without accepting their core tenets. Their model also acknowledges the possibility of strategic use, notably when individuals are familiar (but not identified) with a logic.

Within the *strategic users* perspective, scholars rather emphasize that logics can be used to accomplish certain aims. For example, in a frequently cited paper, McPherson and Sauder (2013) found that professionals with different backgrounds working in a drug court (public defenders, state attorneys, probation officers, etc.) drew on a variety of logics in micro-level negotiations about drug cases – not only on their own professional logics, but also those of other groups (“hijacking”). In a paper which nuances the view of individuals as strategic users, Voronov & Yorks (2015) argue from a constructive developmental perspective that people have varying ability to perceive the antecedents for institutional change which characterize pluralistic environments – *institutional contradictions* – since it is not uncommon to perceive an institutional order, even if contradictory, as not only inevitable but natural.

In conclusion, studies of how individuals respond to pluralism are beginning to emerge, and there are several important contributions within the field. However, the literature is still in a nascent state (Jaumier et al., 2017; Brandl & Bullinger, 2017; Voronov & Yorks, 2015). In addition, despite all the efforts described above, the logics literature remains criticized for disregarding “people”, with feelings, social bonds, and commitments (Lok et al., 2017). In accordance, these scholars say, future research should emphasize the *lived experience* of individuals within institutional arrangements (Creed et al., 2014; Lok et al., 2017).

#### **2.1.4 (PR) consultants in the logics literature**

Surprisingly, given the ubiquity of consultants in organizational life, and the size of the logics literature, there is little research that investigates the consultancy phenomenon from a logics perspective.<sup>4</sup> Studies that acknowledge clients are especially scarce. For example, Ollila et al. (2015) and Alvehus (2018) both use consultancies as research sites for investigating organization-internal co-existence of multiple logics, but do not address client-consultant relationships. Currie and Spyridonidis (2016) study how nurse consultants balance logics when implementing standardized care guidelines, but define these consultants simply as mid-level hybrid managers within the organization. Beyond the consultancy

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<sup>4</sup> Concluded from a Scopus search for articles mentioning both institutional logics and consultants, including truncated versions of the words, in their titles or abstracts (“institutional logic\*” AND consult\*).

function specifically, however, Brodник and Brown (2017) recently proposed a partial conceptual extension of Thornton et al.'s (2012) microfoundations model to the context of *boundary spanners*. Boundary spanners, a broad category which is understood to include consultants, are organizational actors whose work entails moving across organizational boundaries (Kitay & Wright, 2004). According to Brodник and Brown (2017), boundary spanners have a number of special characteristics, which enable them to strategically use the microfoundations of logics – availability, accessibility, and activation (Thornton et al., 2012) – to steer the attention and actions of other organizational members.

To some extent, consultants have been conceptualized in the broader field of organizational institutionalism, especially within Scandinavian institutionalism – a perspective which takes special interest in the travel and translation of management ideas (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017; cf. Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Within this field, Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall (2002) conceive of consultants – alongside other functions, such as business schools and the media – as mediating *carriers* who profess, provide and circulate ideas, thus contributing to local imitation and translation processes (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). Recently, von Platen (2015) applied a Scandinavian institutionalist perspective to PR consultants specifically, understanding them to perform various translating functions as transcoders, sense-makers, and sense-givers.

In sum, however, consulting has received limited attention within both the logics perspective and organizational institutionalism more broadly. In the most established conceptualization, consultants are treated in an instrumentalized way – as carriers of ideas (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002) – rather than as an “inhabited” organizational phenomenon in their own right (cf. the “people” problem, Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Thus, much remains to be done in studying their unique institutional conditions, and how they engage with them.

## 2.2 Research gap

Despite the prevalence of the consultancy function in organizational life and in other academic fields (for reviews, see Nikolova & Devinney, 2012; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2012), it has received surprisingly limited attention within the field of institutional logics and organizational institutionalism more broadly. PR consultants act in a unique institutional context, characterized by the need to act in consideration of the institutional logic(s) of each client, as well as their own firm (cf. Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). Therefore, individual responses to institutional pluralism in the consultancy setting in general, and PR consultancy setting in particular, warrants theorizing. This research gap is illustrated in figure 2 below.

This thesis contributes to the growing field of individual responses to institutional pluralism by studying how PR consultants respond to institutional pluralism that arises between themselves and clients who are embedded in different institutional contexts. By doing so, we also respond to continued calls to address the field's “people” problem (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) in two ways – by directing attention to the lived experience of our informants (Lok et al., 2017); and by treating consultants not in an instrumentalized way, as the field has done before, but as a human phenomenon worthy of study in its own right.



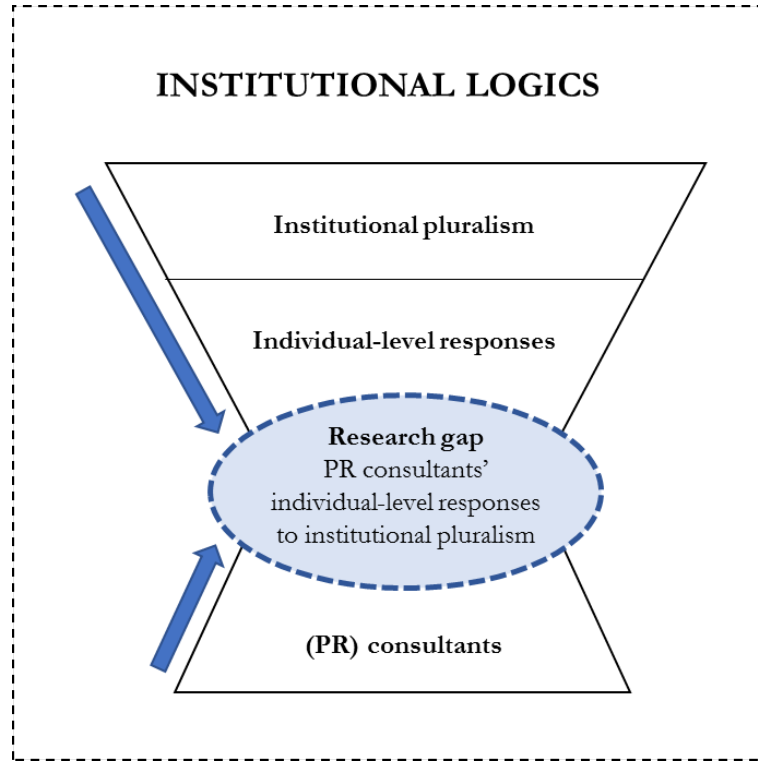


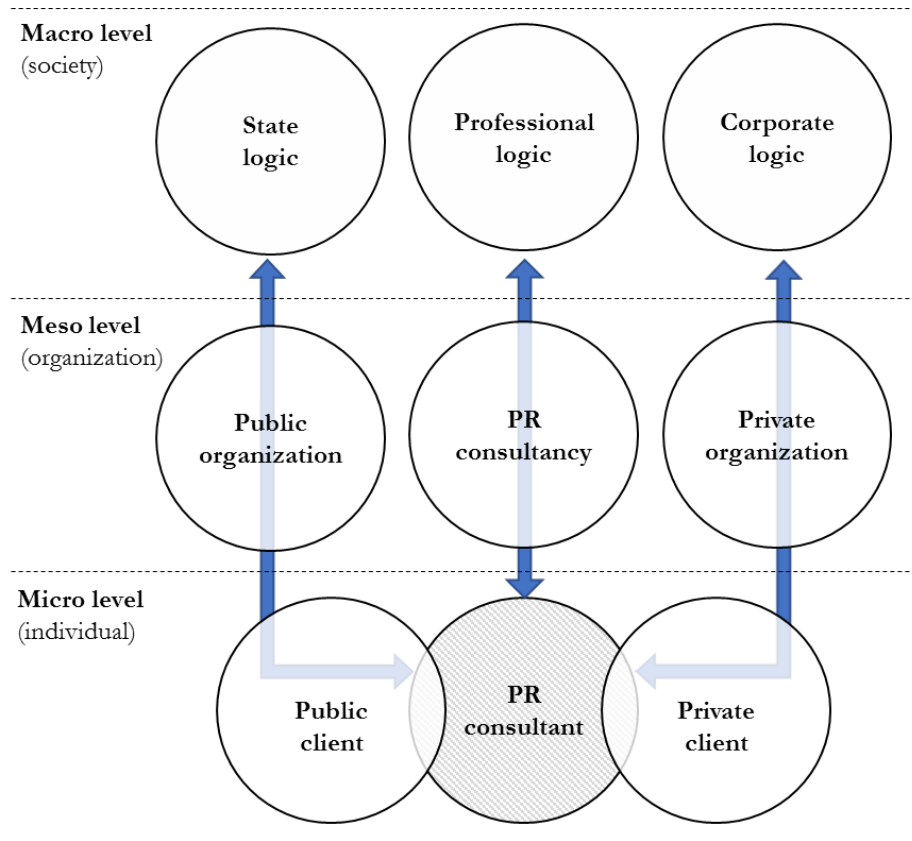
Figure 2: Illustration of the research gap.

## 2.3 Theoretical framework

Drawing on the work of several scholars, we have synthesized a theoretical framework adapted to our research question. Below, we introduce the framework in two parts: first, a conceptualization of the research context, including key assumptions and demarcations (2.3.1), and second, a framework which will be used to analyze the empirical data (2.3.2). We then discuss where the analytical framework is situated along the socialized-strategic continuum (2.3.3) and finally how it is applied (2.3.4).

### 2.3.1 Research context conceptualization

Below in figure 3, we illustrate the research context conceptualization: how PR consultants, as boundary spanners, act in a context where they interact with different logics as part of their daily work. Since we aim to study how PR consultants generally respond to client logics, rather than a single logic within a specific sector, the study encompasses both the public and private sectors.



**Figure 3: Research context conceptualization.**

We conceptualize the research context as consisting of *three ideal-type institutional logics* – state, corporate and professional (Thornton et al., 2012), for which full definitions are presented in appendix 1. These ideal-type logics are central to the logics literature and have been extensively researched (Thornton et al., 2012; Thornton, 2004; Friedland & Alford, 1991). As such, validating their existence is not a main focus of this thesis – rather, we study how PR consultants respond to these logics. We therefore take their presence as given. Of this assumption follows that there are macro-level differences in institutional logics between client sectors (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012), and that such macro-level differences are felt at the level of the individual consultants (Thornton et al., 2012).

We study two client sectors, the public sector and the private sector, since these are presumed to reflect the *state logic* and *corporate logic* – two ideal-type logics with distinct and different fundamental assumptions (Thornton et al., 2012; Thornton, 2004; Friedland & Alford, 1991). We recognize that dividing the market into public and private clients – and thus conceptualizing pluralism as mainly a matter of the corporate and state logic – is a simplification (see section 1.4). However, it aligns with our research purpose, which views the public and private sectors not as subjects for study in their own right, but rather as productive examples for understanding how PR consultants respond to institutional pluralism. The state logic provides the “rules of the game” through which our respondents’ public-sector clients interpret their organizational reality (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 2; Thornton et al., 2012; appendix 1). This includes, among other dimensions, democratic participation

as the source of legitimacy, and increasing community good as the basis for strategy. Similarly, the corporate logic shapes how our respondents' private-sector clients interpret their organizational reality – including the market position of the firm as the source of legitimacy, and growing the size of the firm as the basis for strategy (Thornton et al., 2012; appendix 1).

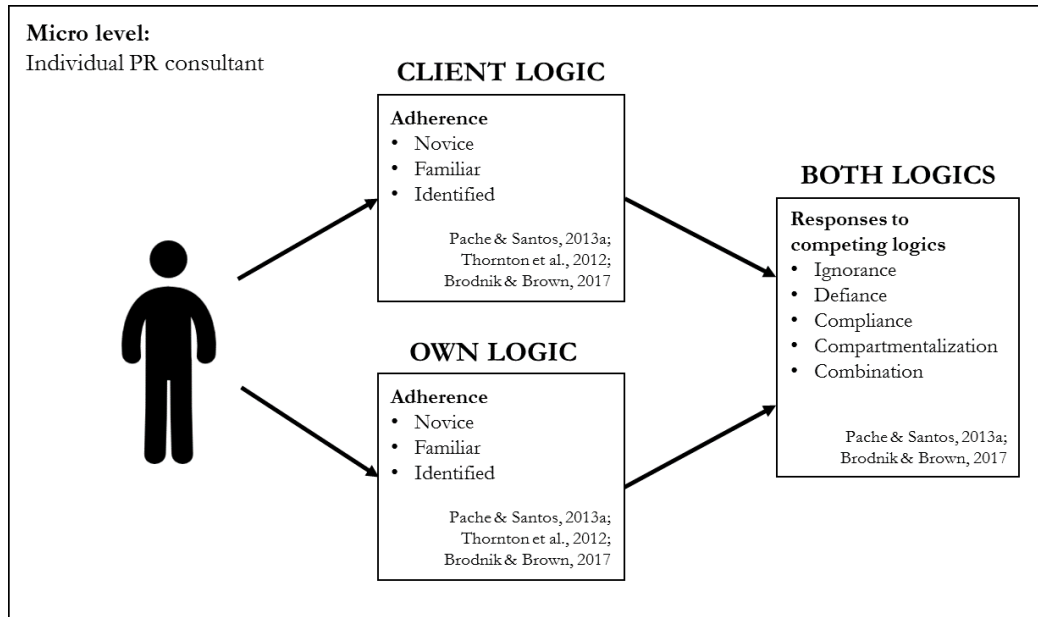
In addition, we assume that the PR consultants are influenced by a *professional logic* (Thornton et al., 2012), which co-exists with the two client logics. The PR industry remains comparatively weakly professionalized (Grandien, 2017) – the degree of self-regulation and ideology within the workforce is fairly low, compared to more highly professionalized industries such as auditing or law (von Nordenflycht, 2010). However, its participants have directed substantial effort to creating a positive industry identity (Grandien, 2017). It is therefore reasonable that the PR consultants operate under some kind of common professional logic, although this logic may vary in strength and character. The professional logic governs how our respondents themselves perceive their organizational reality (Thornton et al., 2012; appendix 1) – including personal expertise as the source of legitimacy, and increasing personal reputation as the basis for strategy.

According to Thornton et al. (2012), these three ideal-type logics rely on distinct and different assumptions, norms, sources of legitimacy, informal control mechanisms, and so on (Thornton et al., 2012). Building on our assumption that macro-level logics are felt at the individual level, this implies that the three logics concurrently exert influence on the individual PR consultant by prescribing norms, values and behaviors that are (at least to some extent) in *competition* with each other (Pache & Santos, 2013a).

### 2.3.2 Analytical framework

We now turn to the analytical framework that will be used for analyzing the empirical data and answering the research question. The analytical framework, presented in figure 4 below, is based on Pache and Santos's (2013a) individual-level "repertoire of responses" to multiple logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a, pp. 12-14), which is, in turn, based on Thornton et al.'s (2012) microfoundations model. Pache and Santos (2013a) develop a framework for individual-level responses in situations where institutional pluralism takes the form of *competition* between two different logics. In doing so, they contend that individual-level responses differ from organizational responses, because individuals are driven by concerns related to social acceptance, status, and identity (cf. Creed et al., 2010), rather than organizational survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Their framework thus aligns with both the purpose and underlying assumptions of this thesis, and is hence an appropriate analytical base.

To adapt Pache and Santos's (2013a) model to the consultancy function, we also incorporate the recent work by Brodnik and Brown (2017), who elaborate on Thornton et al.'s (2012) microfoundations model in the context of boundary spanners. Thus, we strike a balance between the socialized and the strategic perspectives, while ensuring commensurability between the framework's component parts. This section will now explain each of these parts, in turn.



**Figure 4: Analytical framework.**

In Pache and Santos (2013a), there are five individual-level responses to two competing logics, presented in table 2 below.

Response	Explanation
Ignorance	“An individual’s lack of reaction vis-à-vis institutional demands, due to lack of awareness of the logic’s influence.” (p. 12)
Defiance	“An individual’s explicit rejection of the values, norms, and practices prescribed by a given logic. (...) Differs from ignorance, in that it entails awareness and disagreement with the resisted logic as opposed to lack of awareness.” (p. 13)
Compliance	“An individual’s full adoption of the values, norms, and practices prescribed by a given logic.” (p. 12)
Compartmentalization	“An individual’s attempt at purposefully segmenting her compliance with competing logics. An individual may display full compliance with a given logic (and reject a competing one) in a given context, and choose to display adherence to the competing logic in other contexts: she enacts all competing logics, yet keeps them separated.” (p. 13)
Combination	“An individual’s attempt at blending some of the values, norms, and practices prescribed by the competing logics. (...) [In case of logic incompatibilities, research suggests strategies including] the selective coupling of intact elements drawn from each logic (Pache & Santos, [2013b]) or the development of new values, norms, or practices that synthesize the competing logics (Chen & O’Mahony, 2006).” (p. 14)

**Table 2: Individual responses to competing institutional logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a).**

These responses depend on an individual's *level of adherence* to each logic, i.e. whether the individual is *novice*, *familiar* or *identified* with them – presented in table 3 below. These levels of adherence are defined in terms of Thornton et al.'s (2012) microfoundations model – the degree to which a logic is *available*, *accessible* and *activated*. The degree of availability is whether a person has been exposed to a logic, and how much knowledge and information they have about it. The degree of accessibility is whether a logic is top-of-mind or not, which is determined by the cultural and situational context. The degree of activation is whether the person actually uses their knowledge of a logic in social interaction. Activation can result from either automatic (unconscious) or controlled (conscious) attentional processes, depending on the accessibility of the logic (Thornton et al., 2012). Under high accessibility, activation is unconscious, and the logic is taken-for-granted. Under medium accessibility, individuals can be active and selective in how they relate to logics, which provides the capacity for individual agency.

Level of adherence	Description	Definition
Novice	“An individual who is novice with respect to a given logic has no (or very little) knowledge or information available about this logic. Such a situation may occur when an individual has not been exposed to the logic and its associated demands nor has interacted with others exposed to them.” (p. 9)	Availability: None/Low Accessibility: None Activation: None
Familiar	“An individual who is familiar with a given logic detains available knowledge about it. Such knowledge was made available to her through direct or mediated social interactions. While available, that knowledge is only moderately accessible to the individual: it does not necessarily come to her mind first because she did not build strong ties to this particular logic. The activation of the logic is therefore possible yet not automatic.” (p. 9)	Availability: High Accessibility: Medium Activation: Medium
Identified	“An individual who is identified with a given logic is one for whom the logic is available and highly accessible and is therefore likely to be activated. In other words, the individual is acquainted with the logic and its organizing principles and feels emotionally and ideologically committed to it: the logic defines for that individual not only what to do but also who she is, as well as how she relates with the rest of the world. Logic identification reinforces the taken-for-grantedness of the logic (...).” (p. 10)	Availability: High Accessibility: High Activation: High

**Table 3: How individuals adhere to institutional logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a).**

Pache & Santos's (2013a) final predictive model is presented in figure 5 below. In this model, the five possible responses to two competing logics (table 2) depend on an individual's level of adherence (table 3) to each of the two logics, separately. For example, if a person is *familiar* with both of the two

competing logics (Logic A and Logic B), the model predicts a *compartmentalization* response between the two logics. As a final aspect, some responses depend on the degree of hybridity between the two logics in the surrounding context, i.e. whether one logic dominates the other, and hence exerts more influence (low hybridity), or if they exert similar influence (high hybridity).

		Logic A		
		<i>Novice</i>	<i>Familiar</i>	<i>Identified</i>
Logic B	<i>Novice</i>	Ignore Logic A and B	Comply with Logic A and Ignore logic B	Comply with logic A and Defy Logic B
	<i>Familiar</i>	Ignore logic A and Comply with logic B	Compartmentalize logics A and B	Compartmentalize logics A and B
	<i>Identified</i>	Ignore logic A and Comply with logic B in low hybridity Defy logic A and Comply with logic B in high hybridity	Combine logics A and B in low hybridity Compartmentalize logics A and B in high hybridity	Combine logics A and B

High hybridity: where logic A and B are of comparable strength

Low hybridity: where logic A dominates logic B

**Figure 5: Individual responses to two competing logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a).**

To adapt Pache & Santos's (2013a) model to the consultancy function, our framework also incorporates Brodnik and Brown's (2017) conceptualization of how availability, accessibility and activation can be strategically used by *boundary spanners* – including consultants (Kitay & Wright, 2004). Briefly summarized, in terms of availability, boundary spanners are inter-organizationally mobile and hence exposed to different logics as part of their fundamental role. In terms of accessibility, boundary spanners tend to be experts in a specific area, but have broad working knowledge of other areas. This makes them skilled at using discipline-specific language, cues and customs to re-code information in a way that suits the receiver – and thereby indirectly make logics accessible to them. In terms of activation, boundary spanners can use their broad discipline-specific knowledge to steer attention and rhetorically amplify environmental stimuli – thereby steering the attention and actions of others.

### 2.3.3 Socialized and strategic dimensions

In line with the broader logics literature, our framework encompasses aspects that are both socialized and strategic, hence fitting the embedded agency assumption (Friedland & Alford, 1991). While the overall premise of Pache and Santos's (2013a) model is quite socialized – responses emanate from

adherence to logics, which is determined by previous experience – they also incorporate an aspect of strategic action, specifically when an individual is *familiar* with a logic. In this case, an individual is exposed to the logic, but neither highly embedded in it, nor highly reliant on it to derive their identity – it is only moderately accessible. This enables the controlled attention needed to actively and selectively relate to logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a). Further, our addition of Brodnik and Brown’s (2017) work ascribes the framework a deeper strategic and agentic dimension. In sum, we consider our framework to incorporate an appropriate balance of socialized and strategic aspects to suit the consultancy function and answer our research question.

### 2.3.4 How the framework is applied

Our analytical framework was presented in figure 4 above, and is reproduced to illustrate the research process in figure 6 below. To answer the research question, the framework is applied in three steps:

1. Analyzing the PR consultants’ level of adherence to client logics.
2. Analyzing their level of adherence to their own logic.
3. Analyzing how they respond to the co-existence of their own logic, and a client logic – thereby investigating Pache and Santos’s (2013a) model in the PR consultancy context.

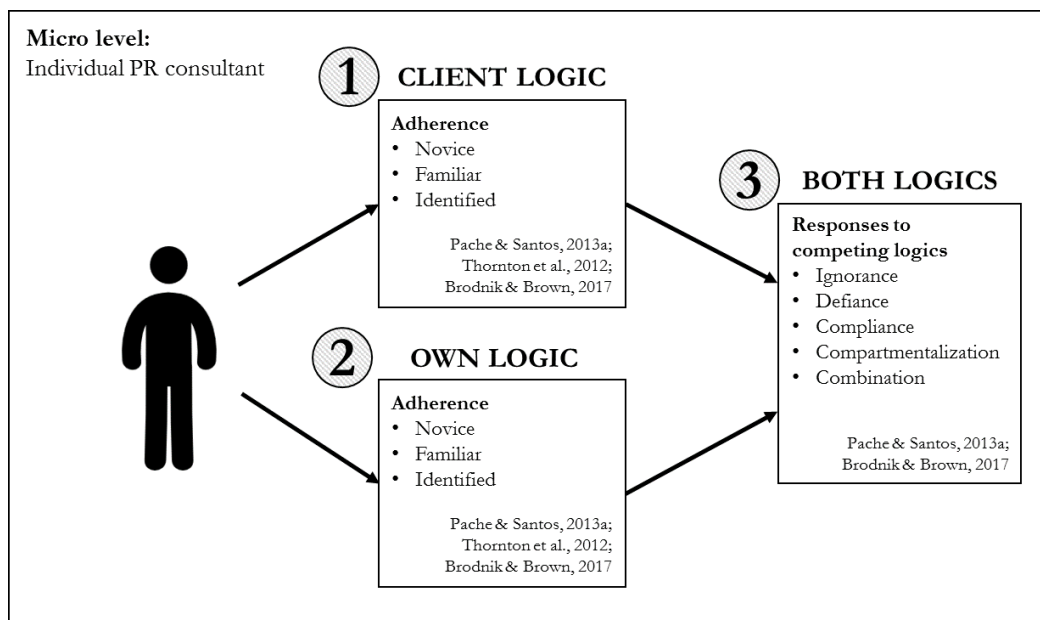


Figure 6: Steps in the analysis process.

Throughout, “client logics” in plural refer to the logics that characterize public and private clients. Since we study general responses to client logics, not sector-specific responses, a “client logic” in singular refers to either the public or the private sphere (with both being equally applicable).

Importantly, while the concepts of availability, accessibility and activation (Thornton et al., 2012) are not explicit in our analytical framework, they underpin it in two key ways. First, they define how a PR consultant adheres to different logics (whether she/he is novice, familiar or identified with

them), and thereby which responses are enacted (Pache & Santos, 2013a). Second – and this is the main extension of our model – as boundary spanners, the consultants can use availability, accessibility and activation strategically, in ways that might influence both adherence and subsequent responses. Since this has not been studied before, Brodnik and Brown's (2017) work is integrated and considered in all three steps of the analysis.



# 3. Methodology

*This section outlines the thesis research methodology in five steps: research approach (3.1), sample (3.2), data collection (3.3), data analysis (3.4), and data quality assessment (3.5).*

## 3.1 Research approach

The overarching methodology in this thesis follows Gioia et al.'s (2013) systematic, abductive approach to grounded theory articulation (the “Gioia methodology”), which has been developed over many years (Rheinhardt et al., 2018) and explicitly strives to attain the high standards of rigor often said to be lacking in qualitative approaches (e.g. Bryman, 1988; Popper, 2002 [1959]). Indeed, a transparent methodology section is itself an important part of attaining rigor, because it enables the reader to independently judge the credibility of our processes and conclusions (Rheinhardt et al., 2018). For this reason, we provide detailed descriptions of our decisions, justifications, and steps throughout the research process.

### 3.1.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations

Stemming from the research aims, this thesis takes a *constructivist* and *interpretivist* stance (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This fits with our theoretical foundation – that logics are under constant social construction and reconstruction by individual actors (Thornton et al., 2012). Our purpose is to understand the lived experiences of our respondents; the meanings they themselves ascribe to their reality (Welch et al., 2011). Thus, subjective interpretations, rather than an objective reality, are in focus (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). This onto-epistemological stance fits with the Gioia methodology, which was originally developed in a paper based on the same foundational assumptions (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). We also acknowledge that we researchers are part of the world we study (Welch et al., 2011), and therefore apply a *reflexive* perspective (section 3.1.5) to manage the fact that Svenonius has industry experience (Finlay, 2002).

In addition, drawing on Gioia et al. (2013, p. 17), we assume that our respondents are *knowledgeable agents* who “know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions”. Similarly, we assume that we as researchers are “pretty knowledgeable people too” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 17), able to see patterns in the data and surface concepts and relationships that might escape the informants – while maintaining qualitative rigor, and staying true to their experiences.

### 3.1.2 Qualitative method

For several reasons, a qualitative research method is used. First, the fairly nascent state of the literature within our research gap supports the choice of a qualitative approach – specifically, an approach oriented towards open-ended learning and “rich, detailed and evocative data” (Edmonsson & McManus, 2007, p. 1162). Second, qualitative approaches are suitable when the phenomenon studied is socially constructed (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). As such, logics are “naturally suited to qualitative data and methods that demand immersion in the phenomenon” – quotes, observations, and thick description are needed to ground insights in the context (Reay & Jones, 2016, p. 442).

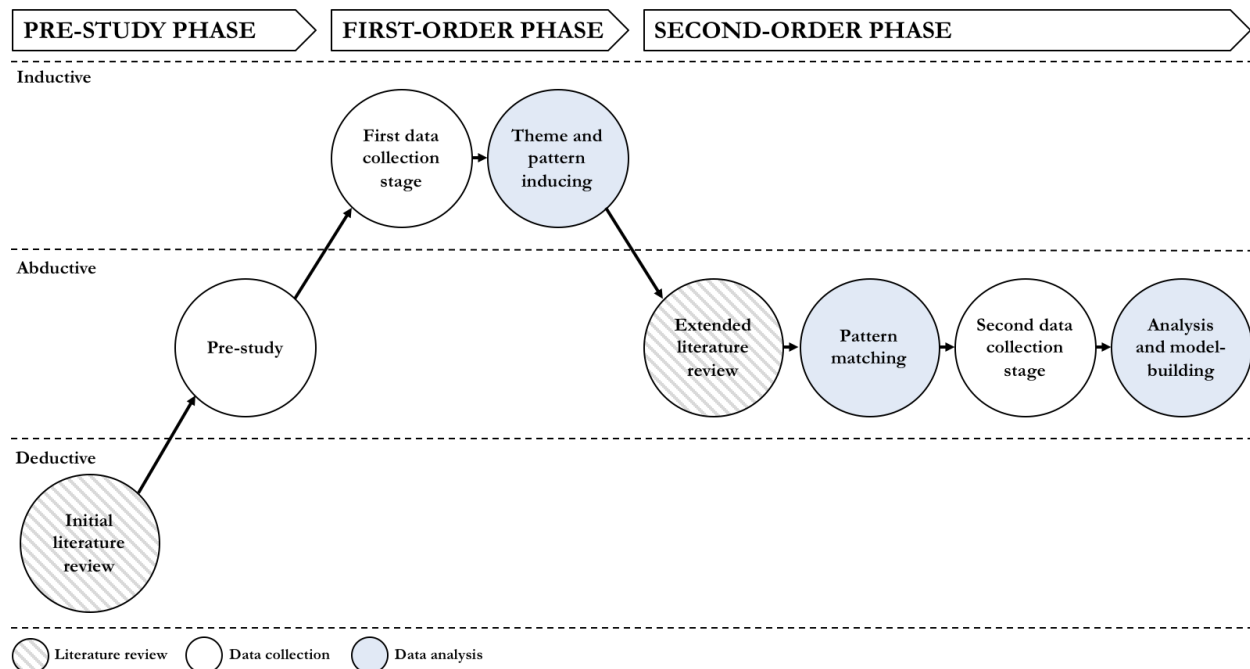
### 3.1.3 Multiple case study design

Since our level of analysis is the individual consultant, and we strive to understand the complexities of each person's lived experience, we view each of our respondents as individual cases (Bryman & Bell, 2015) – specific, unique, and bounded systems (Stake, 2005). This thesis thus jointly studies a number of cases to investigate the broader phenomenon of how PR consultants respond to institutional pluralism – it is a multiple case study (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Stake, 2005).

While case study designs have a strong positivist legacy (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), new generations of scholars advocate for a more pluralistic approach (Piekkari & Welch, 2018; Welch et al., 2011; Thomas & Myers, 2015) – including the use of case studies in interpretive research (Welch et al., 2011; Stake, 2005). In line with these scholars, we understand the purpose of case studies as originally defined – “in-depth investigation of a phenomenon in its context” – and thus not as a “bridge” to context-free generalizations (Piekkari & Welch, 2018, pp. 357, 346).

### 3.1.4 Abductive approach

An abductive approach, which accesses advantages of both deductive and inductive methods, is suitable for qualitative research in general (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) and interpretive case studies in particular (Piekkari & Welch, 2018). Our specific approach is based on the Gioia methodology, in which an initial (semi-)inductive, “first-order” phase leads into an abductive, “second-order” phase, as visualized in figure 7.



**Figure 7: Research process.** Developed by the thesis authors, inspired by Gioia et al. (2013) and Reay & Jones (2016).

The data collection and analysis phases are described in-depth in sections 3.3 and 3.4. There was significant overlap between the steps within each phase, as we continuously moved back and forth between theory and data, and between analysis and data collection.

### **3.1.5 Reflexivity**

A critical part of claiming moral integrity and trustworthiness in qualitative research is acknowledging the central role played by ourselves, as researchers, and how subjective and intersubjective factors affect our research (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Finlay, 2002). Applying reflexive practices – processes of thoughtful, conscious self-awareness (Corlett & Marvin, 2018) – in our research was deemed important since Svenonius has experience working in the PR industry. She was thus an “insider” who was studying the “familiar” (Berger, 2015, p. 222-223). This confers several advantages, notably easier access to respondents, pre-existing knowledge about the topic, and more nuanced understanding of respondent reactions (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006; Padgett, 2008). However, such familiarity also requires constant reflexive alertness to avoid projecting the researcher’s own experience onto the respondents (Berger, 2015). To this end, continuous dialogue with Alktun, with no industry experience, helped surface implicit frameworks, motivations, assumptions and interests in relation to the study. In addition, we used reflexive practices in our data analysis (see section 3.4) as a way to use researcher subjectivity to generate deeper insights (Cassell et al., 2018; Finlay, 2002; Frank, 1997).

It should be noted that reflexive analysis is not without criticism, especially towards its presumptions of self-awareness (Finlay, 2002). For example, Seale (1999) argues that a presumed self-critical and conscious researcher, with direct access to their subjective motivations and feelings, is unreasonable – indeed, superhuman. However, this presumption aligns with our assumptions in this thesis, of us researchers as knowledgeable agents (Gioia et al., 2013).

## **3.2 Sample**

As a main advocate of interpretive case studies (Welch et al., 2011), Stake (1995, 2005) argues that cases should primarily be selected based on their opportunity for learning, and secondarily to achieve variety and balance. This stance informed our purposive sampling strategy at the firm and individual level (Rheinhardt et al., 2018; Bryman & Bell, 2015), described below. The benefits of random sampling were thus traded for more meaningful, criterion-specific understanding (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In particular, the purpose of the study is to explore how PR consultants generally respond to client logics, rather than to clients in a specific, predefined sector. To separate general response strategies from sector-specific ones, both public and private clients are in focus within the study. Experience from both public and private clients was thus a prerequisite for participation.

### **3.2.1 Anonymization**

Due to previous media scrutiny (e.g. Wiman & Aschberg, 2015), and client-consultant confidentiality, respondents and companies were guaranteed anonymity to enable them to speak as freely as possible. This helped mitigate the risk of undue emphasis on positive aspects of PR consulting, while increasing the possibility to discuss potentially sensitive topics, and the credibility of the findings (Bryman & Bell,

2015). Furthermore, some respondents explicitly demanded anonymization, and that quotes should not be tied to themselves or their firms. At the individual level, for increased anonymity, and because no gender-based patterns emerged from the data, respondents were assigned pseudonyms without regard to gender. The overall collection of pseudonyms reflects the 50%-50% gender split of the sample.

### 3.2.2 Selection of firms

In addition to learning, the overarching goal of firm selection was to achieve variety and balance in relation to the PR consultancy industry in Sweden (Stake, 2005; Bryman & Bell, 2015), in terms of company size, profile and clientele. Five firms were selected and agreed to partake, which was deemed sufficient to separate firm-specific from industry-general factors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For practical purposes, firms with offices in Stockholm were prioritized.

The purposive sampling process was conducted in two steps. First, we selected the trade association PRECIS<sup>5</sup> to be used as an industry proxy. PRECIS is an association for consultancies within PR and communication, comprising most larger PR consultancies in Sweden. Since not all PR consultancies are members of PRECIS, we complemented the selection from the association with an additional renowned firm (Company E). Further, PRECIS does not represent small firms (<5 employees). However, since our research question demands a client base spanning both the public and private sectors, the learning potential was deemed lower in this segment.

Second, we relied on industry knowledge to select specific firms. The pre-study phase (section 3.3.1) provided qualitative insight into which firms were relevant for the research question, as well as which would entail good variety and balance within the sample (Stake, 2005; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Particularly, we sought firms with varying exposure to the public vs. private sector, including some with industry-leading exposure to the public sector (50%-50%), as well as firms of varying sizes. The selected firms are introduced in table 4.

Company	Share of private vs. public clients	Respondents <sup>6</sup>
Company A	50%-50%	1 partner, 2 senior, 1 junior
Company B	50%-50%	3 partner, 0 senior, 1 junior
Company C	80%-20%	1 partner, 2 senior, 1 junior
Company D	80%-20%	2 partner, 1 senior, 1 junior
Company E	90%-10%	1 partner, 1 senior, 0 junior

**Table 4: Firm sample.**

<sup>5</sup> The Association for Public Relations Consultancies in Sweden (Sw. *Föreningen Public Relations Konsultföretag i Sverige*).

<sup>6</sup> A detailed specification of each respondent's role and experience is found in appendix 2.

Due to the small size of the PR consulting industry, the company-level background information is restricted to their shares of private and public clients. The companies range in size from a few dozen to a couple of hundred employees. Reporting their sizes in detail, however, would reveal some of their identities.

### **3.2.3 Selection of respondents**

Four respondents from each firm was targeted in order to separate individual-specific from firm-general answers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to saturate the data. In one case (Company E) only two interviews were secured. Even so, this company contributed variation within the sample, and the two respondents are hence included in the study. One of the firms (Company C) was Svenonius's former employer, thus, four respondents were former colleagues. We took extra care to avoid "going native" in these interviews and their subsequent analysis (see sections 3.1.5 and 3.4). We had no pre-existing relationships with any other firms or respondents. After 18 respondents, we deemed our empirical themes to be saturated and exhausted. All interviewees, including their roles and experience, are presented in appendix 2.

In line with Pache and Santos's (2013a) argument that previous experience with logics shapes responses to institutional pluralism, our individual-level sampling strategy centered on selecting respondents from varying levels in the consultant hierarchy (assuming that hierarchical level corresponds to experience with clients in different sectors, and thus with the related institutional logics). In all cases, we required the informants to have at least some direct experience with clients both in the public and private sectors, which led to a sample with more seniors and partners than juniors.

It should be noted that the respondent sampling was partly based on chain selection (Bryman & Bell, 2015), since respondents were typically selected in dialogue with one main contact person at each firm. While this potentially biases the sampling – for example, the contact persons might select respondents on convenience rather than relevance – we aimed to mitigate this risk through clearly communicating our sampling rationale, and in some cases suggesting interviewees.

## **3.3 Data collection**

### **3.3.1 Data collection phases**

As discussed in section 3.1.4, our study encompassed several phases, including three stages of data collection. These are presented below.

#### **3.3.1.1 Pre-study**

Through a short pre-study, combined with pre-existing industry knowledge, we enhanced our understanding of the research context and data collection possibilities. The study consisted of informal dialogue with three PR consultants in Svenonius's network and one semi-structured interview with a former PR consultant. None of these individuals were included in the main study. The purpose was to map the PR consulting industry in relation to our research, test the relevance of potential studies, and (through the longer interview) improve the design of the semi-structured interview method and interview guide (Yin, 2010).

### **3.3.1.2 First data collection phase**

The first phase was explorative, focusing on inductively building empirical themes in relation to the research question. This stage consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews (from all companies). At this stage, an initial literature review had been conducted, and we were not uninformed about prior work. However, we applied what Gioia et al. (2013, p. 21) describe as a “willing suspension of belief” or “enforced ignorance” of previous theorizing to maintain an inductive stance and let the data speak for itself, thus balancing our perspective in a way that enabled “discovery without reinventing the well-ridden wheels”.

### **3.3.1.3 Second data collection phase**

The second phase increasingly focused on concepts and tentative relationships emerging from the interviews thus far (Gioia et al., 2013). In this stage, 5 semi-structured interviews were conducted (from Companies A and C). Prior to this phase, we compared the findings from the first data collection phase with existing literature, to investigate how they confirmed or diverged from it, and in what ways our data could contribute. The second phase served to validate and nuance our empirical findings, and dive deeper into particularly relevant topics. Importantly, firms and respondents were selected prior to the second phase, and hence not deliberately selected based on the emerging findings.

## **3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, a preferred approach in qualitative research (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This method ensured that relevant topics were covered, while maintaining flexibility for respondents to elaborate on thoughts and motivations (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A list of interview dates, durations and participants is found in appendix 2.

Since we were investigating our respondents’ lived experiences – a profoundly personal subject – we recognized the importance of having deep respect for our respondents, and attaining the necessary rapport for high-quality information gathering (Lee & Aslam, 2018; Dundon & Ryan, 2010). We sought to build affinity by conveying our genuine interest for the research topic, and build trust by guaranteeing anonymity and assuring interviewees that we had no media-style investigative agenda (Lee & Aslam, 2018). All interviews were conducted face-to-face, which also facilitated affinity, and hence contributed to data depth and quality (Lee & Aslam, 2018).

The interviews took place in conference rooms at the interviewees’ offices, to ensure convenience and minimize their effort (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The office environment likely regulated their responses towards what was felt to be appropriate within the work domain, but since our research concerns work, this was not deemed an issue (Lee & Aslam, 2018). To avoid miscommunication, all interviews were held in Swedish – the mother tongue of both the interviewers and interviewees. In one case, two respondents (of equal seniority) were interviewed jointly, since this was the only possibility to fit a full-hour interview into their schedules. While this setting may have influenced their answers, we strove to mitigate its impact by encouraging both participants to address each question, and by probing deeper when we noticed salient verbal and non-verbal reactions to the other participant.

Both researchers were present to the maximum extent possible, to ensure that the collected data could be interpreted by both authors (Eisenhardt, 1989). Responsibilities were divided so that

one researcher led the interview, thus immersing themselves in the case details, while the other took a more objective and critical view of the data and emergent interpretations (Eisenhardt, 1989). This included taking notes and asking follow-up questions. During the study, these responsibilities were switched so that both researchers held both roles. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after being held. Analysis began immediately, concurrent with the data collection (see section 3.4).

### **3.3.3 Interview guide**

As suggested by Bryman and Bell (2015), an interview guide was used. The initial guide was based on industry knowledge and the initial literature review, and piloted in the pre-study. Its purpose was to generate enough data to thoroughly and truthfully answer the research question, while minimizing superfluous information.

In accordance with the abductive method, this interview guide was successively refined to ensure that data was collected as efficiently as possible (Gioia et al., 2013), and to incorporate aspects that emerged during the study (Lee & Aslam, 2018). This entailed a gradual progression where less structure was deployed in earlier interviews, and slightly more in later ones. Throughout these revisions, we mitigated the influence of confirmation bias from the emerging findings by avoiding leading-the-witness questions. Two interview guides, from the first and second stage, are presented in appendices 5-6.

## **3.4 Data analysis**

To analyze the data, we relied on the Gioia methodology, complemented by Reay and Jones's (2016) review of qualitative research within institutional logics. As presented in section 3.1.4, the analysis took place within two phases – a first-order, open-coding phase using informant-centric terms, and a second-order, axial-coding phase which also incorporated researcher-centric concepts, themes, and dimensions (Rheinhardt et al., 2018; Gioia et al., 2013). Importantly, it is somewhat artificial to separate these analysis phases from their corresponding data collection phases, since they proceeded in tandem, and we analyzed and iteratively coded the data (Langley, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). However, there was a clear temporal distinction between the first- and second-order phases, since the latter began only after an extended revisitation of the literature.

Throughout, we were particularly conscious of two issues. First, that each author would interpret informant terms and passages based on their own perspective, which might lead to disagreements over meanings (Gioia et al., 2013). However, in line with our reflexive approach, we viewed divergent interpretations as sources of insight rather than problems. We therefore coded the data individually, and later compared the results (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Where divergences occurred, we revisited the data and engaged in mutual discussions, thereby reaching consensus while allowing deeper insights to emerge. Second, we recognized the elevated risk of going native, given Svenonius's industry experience – i.e. overly adopting our informants' views, and losing the researcher's higher-level perspective. To mitigate this risk, we consciously used devil's advocate techniques when critiquing interpretations and questioning data (Gioia et al., 2013; van Maanen, 1979).

In the first-order analysis, we maintained the aforementioned “enforced ignorance” (Gioia et al., 2013), adhering to informant terms and letting the data speak for itself – thus beginning to answer the research question in non-theoretical terms. We distilled categories, and started seeing similarities and differences. In this step, we used a *pattern inducing* approach, focusing on raw data and using a bottom-up process to identify patterns and themes that we could later compare with the existing logics literature (Reay & Jones, 2016). Indeed, Reay and Jones (2016, p. 451) note that “the pattern inducing approach can be a particularly interesting way to build new theory, particularly in terms of linking micro-level phenomenon [*sic.*] to institutional concepts”.

In the second-order analysis, we were “firmly in the theoretical realm” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20), following the extended literature review. In this phase, data and existing theory were considered in tandem (Gioia et al., 2013) – we connected emerging empirical themes with existing theories and concepts by iterating between raw data, emerging concepts and dimensions, and the relevant literature. In this way, we linked our findings to extant theory, while at the same time remaining open-minded to the possibility of having identified new concepts. In this step, we also incorporated elements of *pattern matching*: identifying patterns from the logics literature and then comparing them to the data, thus privileging existing theory and research (Reay & Jones, 2016).

After generating a saturated set of themes and concepts (cf. theoretical saturation, Glaser & Strauss, 1967), these were distilled further into aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). The resulting set of first-order codes, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions provide the basis for our data structure (Gioia et al., 2013), exemplified in figure 8 and presented as a whole in appendix 4. The data structure is a graphic representation of our progress from raw data to aggregate dimensions, and “a key component of demonstrating rigor in qualitative research” (Pratt, 2008; Tracy, 2010). Finally, the dynamic interrelationships of the concepts, themes and dimensions were analyzed in order to build a model (Gioia et al., 2013; Nag et al., 2007).

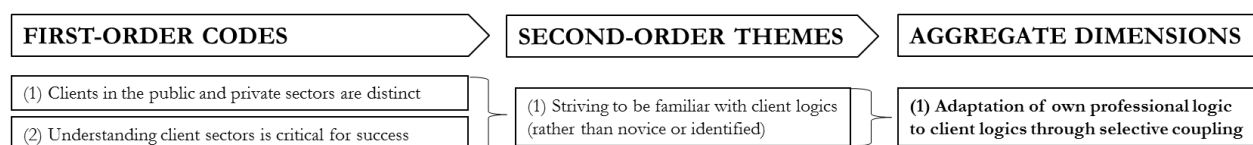


Figure 8: Partial extract from data structure.

### 3.5 Data quality assessment

There is an ongoing debate regarding the relevance of reliability and validity for assessing qualitative research, with several methods developed specifically for qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Here, we rely on a modified version of reliability and validity adapted to qualitative research (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Bryman & Bell, 2015). It is worth reiterating that the Gioia methodology specifically aims to ensure rigor and quality in qualitative research.



### 3.5.1 Reliability

The degree to which research is replicable is referred to as the external reliability (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative approaches have been said to impede reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2015), since they are in certain ways considered to lack objectivity (Kvale, 1997). As a specific version of social reality is presented, it cannot be considered definitive, as it is constantly revised (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In an attempt to enhance the potential for replication, we have described the research process as comprehensively as possible.

Internal reliability (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Bryman & Bell, 2015) regards the subjectivity of the researchers' interpretations. Subjective influences were partially counteracted in the interviews through the presence of both researchers to the maximum extent possible, and the potential to ask clarifying follow-up questions (Bryman & Bell 2015), as well as individual coding and joint data interpretations (Bazeley, 2013). In addition, our reflexive practices (section 3.1.5) were specifically aimed at addressing researcher subjectivity.

Still, we acknowledge the risk of interpretive biases (Elliott & Timulak, 2005). Researchers' interpretations of data are always potentially influenced by their experiences, pre-existing ideas, and interpretations of the surroundings (Maxwell, 2013). This was particularly important for us due to Svenonius's experience. For this reason, we questioned and critiqued our interpretations through the use of devil's advocate techniques, careful not to completely adopt the world-view of our respondents (Gioia et al., 2013).

### 3.5.2 Validity

External validity refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized across settings (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative research generally uses smaller sample sizes, impeding generalizability. Although ideas differ on how many interviews are appropriate, some authors (e.g. Brinkmann, 2012) argue that there are advantages in avoiding too many, since this might entail loss in depth. However, Gioia et al. (2013, referencing Lincoln & Guba, 1985) maintain that it is possible to generalize from small samples by extracting transferable concepts and principles. "Pure" interpretivists tend to maintain that "when one is studying the socially constructed structures and processes of others, those structures and processes are necessarily idiosyncratic because they are fashioned and performed by unique individuals acting within unique contexts" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 24). However, like Gioia et al. (2013), we maintain that "many concepts and processes are similar, even structurally equivalent (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999), across domains", as long as the data generates concepts or principles with obvious relevance to other domains.

Internal validity is about the match between observations and the developed theoretical ideas (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Gioia et al.'s (2013) method of data analysis and presentation is directly aimed at enhancing internal validity. Clarifying follow-up questions, continuous use of devil's advocate techniques, and independent coding structures were used. Furthermore, like Gioia et al. (2013), we rely on the assumption that we as researchers are able to discern patterns in the data and formulate concepts and relationships that are rigorous and true to the respondents' experiences.

Lastly and critically, the validity of the study is directly interlinked with the research purpose – exploring an unstudied research area. While the validity of the study could be complemented by quantitative research of the themes and concepts created through the qualitative analysis, this lies strictly outside the scope of the study.

## 4. Empirical findings

*This section presents the empirical findings in five steps. First, we provide a brief background on PR consulting (4.1). Next, we show how PR consultants relate to the public and private sectors (4.2) and their own craft (4.3), and how they adapt to clients (4.4). Finally, we present our findings as a list of codes, in preparation for the subsequent analysis (4.5). For the sake of parsimony and clarity, the empirical findings are presented in aggregate, for all respondents. A breakdown of which respondents addressed which codes is found in appendix 3.*

### 4.1 Brief background on PR consulting

Due to anonymity requirements, no in-depth description of the PR consultancies or individual consultants can be provided. Generally, the firms in the sample have broad service offerings that span across several fields, such as organizational communication (e.g. media trainings, crisis communication, stakeholder management, publicity generation), public affairs (influencing political decision-making through opinion-making or advocacy), financial communication (e.g. investor relations, mergers and acquisitions, annual reports) and content development (e.g. producing films, graphics, websites, or podcasts). Their work encompasses both non-routine tasks such as strategic advice and routine elements of production.

To contextualize how the PR consultants in our sample work internally and with their clients, we highlight two aspects of their work – both of which are salient for the subsequent analysis. First, a PR consultant almost always serves several clients simultaneously. At any given time, this client base usually incorporates a variety of clients, e.g. from different sectors, and different project types. Second, to manage this diverse range of clients, the consultants normally perform their daily work at the consultancy office rather than the client site. Even in rare cases where PR consultants are hired to take the role of client-internal staff, the work is often carried out at the PR consultancy office.

### 4.2 How PR consultants relate to client sectors

According to the PR consultants in our sample, public and private clients have distinct characteristics (4.2.1), and understanding each client's preconditions is key to trust, legitimacy and success (4.2.2). To this end, the PR consultants are selected to projects based on their background and interests (4.2.3), and use active strategies to build knowledge about different types of clients and projects (4.2.4). Indeed, broad exposure to both sectors is inherently desirable, because it builds general competencies and enables knowledge transfer between clients (4.2.5).

#### 4.2.1 Clients in the public and private sectors are distinct

All respondents identified salient differences between clients in the public and private sectors. These differences spanned across seven inductively identified dimensions, of which three are presented below. A full list is included in appendix 7.

First, several respondents described how the purpose of communication differs between the sectors. In the private sector, communication is tied to the bottom line, survival and growth, and thus

a means to an end. In the public sector, communication is rather seen as a means to achieve legitimacy, which is a prerequisite for being able to serve society at all.

“Often, the value in the private sector is more bombastically concerned with brands and revenue. (...) While in the public sector, the value can be concerned with... in the end, that these organizations can fulfil the role they have in society, and deliver value in this capacity” (Jan)

Second, in public organizations, decisions are made through consensus-building and internal politics, which leads to long and slow anchoring processes within consulting projects. In contrast, in the private sector, decisions are typically made more quickly and by empowered individuals, with limited regard for the rest of the organization.

“Fundamentally, public agencies are politically governed organizations. (...) These kinds of organizations are known to be rather bothersome to navigate. Decision-making processes are longer, and there is perhaps a bit more internal politics (...) compared to the private sector” (Agnes)

Third, public sector clients act in a comparatively more complicated environment, with many rules and stakeholders to consider, and specific norms and values for appropriate communication. These clients thus tend to be more risk averse than private clients, and unwilling to engage in certain types of communication, such as public advocacy and overtly creative campaigns.

“It’s not about not being creative [in the public sector], because it’s absolutely about being creative, but you can’t think outside the box as much. You have to think inside the box. Which constraints does this organization have? Which constraints are set by the government, and who has set these constraints? What is [the client] supposed to do, and how do these constraints affect that?” (Jan)

#### **4.2.2 Understanding client sectors is critical for success**

One of the clearest empirical findings was the perceived importance of understanding the context and preconditions surrounding each client (in addition to understanding each client’s specificities). Sector-specific knowledge underpins the PR consulting craft, which to a large extent centers on understanding and managing the client’s external environment. It is also important because it signals legitimacy and builds trust in sales processes and during projects. Several respondents underscored that this is true for all industries, not just the public and private spheres as a whole. Regardless of how the scope is defined, however, the need to understand the client’s reality is paramount.

“As a consultant, everything fundamentally builds on industry knowledge, this is critical to understand... and the public sector is an industry which has its own logic. (...) There are correspondingly large differences between industries within the private sector too, where you have to understand completely different cultures (...) and different roles, completely different types of consulting” (Ida)

Indeed, a lack of context sensitivity can entail misunderstandings or conflicts, not least among public clients. In the public sector, a PR consultant must manage a generally more complex set of

expectations from the clients' external stakeholders (the public, the media, politicians, etc.). They must also understand, respect and navigate client-internal processes that usually work differently from what they themselves – who work in the private sector – are used to.

“If [our firm employed] a colleague who knew nothing about politics, you wouldn't want that person in a project for a public agency, because of the risk of it going wrong” (Agnes)

“An important matter is that you have to understand the role of the public sector. I think this often... can lead to conflicts, when you have consultants who don't get it, who don't understand that dynamic. I think that can lead to misunderstandings” (Christina)

#### **4.2.3 Staffing to projects based on background and interests**

The importance of pre-existing understanding of a client's conditions is reflected in how the PR consultants are staffed (or self-select) to different client types based on a combination of experience and personal interest. Some respondents also emphasized that a consultant's personality can play a part in which clients they serve.

“We who have a political background tend to be attracted to [projects in] the public sector. Or, you don't need a political background, but a very great interest in societal matters, and good political understanding, and so on. (...) If you fulfil any of these criteria, you will usually be more attracted to working with public clients than if you didn't have that understanding in the background” (Agnes)

“You get a bit of a label – [he/she] has had many of those kinds of projects, and those kinds of customers (...) For example, I've worked with public procurement a few times (...), and not everyone understands how that works, so now I often get requested for it” (Benjamin)

#### **4.2.4 Using strategies to learn about client sectors**

To build their stocks of knowledge about different kinds of clients and projects, the PR consultants use three main strategies. The first is to learn on-the-job within specific projects. By staffing consultant teams with persons of diverse seniority, backgrounds and experience, those with less exposure to certain aspects of the client or project are able to learn from their colleagues. A version of this strategy, when the necessary experience or knowledge is not available within the firm, is to “role-play” and thereby learn from the client instead.

“We take an art director and a PhD in political sciences, and we take a journalist and a filmmaker, and they work together. And they work with a societal problem, or whatever we're working on. And then they learn a ton. It's a lot about learning within projects” (Jan)

“We role-play a little, to put it that way... We do what we think will work, in a way, and it usually does” (Rebecca)

The second strategy is desk research. This is typically used in specific situations, for example in pitching processes, or when launching a project with a new client.

“[As part of a procurement process], we have to understand [the client] and do our research, look through what we have, and their plans and reports and communication documents and how they appear online and so on” (Ida)

The third strategy is ongoing, internal knowledge sharing within the company. In this case, talking about client matters or societal issues is perceived as part of the collegial environment, and people learn from each other during coffee breaks and other informal interactions, as well as in projects.

“We can almost always draw on knowledge we gain from one project in other projects (...), to the client’s benefit in the end. (...) We exchange knowledge [internally with each other] all the time” (Per)

#### **4.2.5 Exposure to both sectors builds capabilities and enables knowledge transfer**

Broad exposure to different clients has inherent value, because wide experience and perspectives contribute to generally better competencies that span across both sectors. For example, one respondent described how they gained a deeper understanding of client-internal politics after starting to work with public clients, and that this enhanced their ability to manage this dimension of all subsequent projects, regardless of sector.

“In our development plans, I think maybe we should require [consultants] to work with public clients, so that they understand that part of society too. (...) I think this makes us better advisors. (...) It’s hard to advise other clients on how to deal with public agencies, or how the public sector works, if you haven’t taken a look for yourself. Just as we’re supposed to have worked with crises, with media relations, I think this is part of a general knowledge” (Rebecca)

Working with both sectors is also beneficial because it enables concrete knowledge transfers between them. For example, “best practices” in terms of creativity and forefront PR techniques – such as influencers and social media – usually emerge in the private sector, and can (partially) be imported to public clients. At the same time, for example, the public sector has a fundamental orientation towards transparency, inclusion and social responsibility, from which the private sector can learn.

“If you work with a public client, you can bring in how things work in the private sphere. If we play with the thought that (...) best practice happens within the private sector, you can bring that in, and help [public clients] improve. And really, the other way around too. Very complex things are discussed within the public sphere (...) which you can bring back to the private sector” (Simon)

### **4.3 How PR consultants view their craft**

Although understanding client contexts is deemed critical, the actual, concrete work of the PR consultants is seen as fundamentally the same across client sectors (4.3.1). Two key parts of their work

is to contribute an outside perspective (4.3.2), and to proactively propose ideas and drive action (4.3.3). In addition, the PR consultants argue that communication and PR are natural and strategically paramount – but that this is often underappreciated, or misunderstood, by others in society (4.3.4).

#### **4.3.1 The fundamental craft is the same across client sectors**

A clear empirical finding was that the actual work – in terms of project types, processes, deliverables, etc. – is perceived as fundamentally the same in the two sectors. Although specific project setups and final deliverables vary on a client-by-client basis, the main aspects of the craft are indeed similar across all clients.

“It’s like... If we’re doing a large information campaign for someone, well, then it’s the usual concept. You have a workshop and agree on the messages, and what our assessment of the current state is, and so on. And this is about the same no matter which kind of client it is” (Agnes)

“In terms of projects... They’re pretty similar. Because, in the end, we’re the ones who create the project structures. Like – okay, we have a challenge – start-up meeting – ask a lot of questions, understand – and then develop solutions, although along the way... present our suggestions, and that we’d like to do this and this. (...) And then... a delivery. So it’s pretty similar, really” (Henrik)

This coherent understanding of the craft was apparent even when the PR consultants acknowledged that the public and private sectors operate under different rationales.

“I don’t think [public and private clients] are that far apart. (...) in both cases the aim [of projects] is to generate some effect, which is supposed to generate value. It’s just that these values are different” (Jan)

#### **4.3.2 Contributing an outside perspective**

Being an “outsider”, i.e. bringing new perspectives to the client and maintaining a fresh and critical eye, is fundamental to how PR consultants perceive that they create value. An outside perspective allows the PR consultants to identify broader trends, opportunities and challenges before the client does.

“What you can’t get by employing another communication professional is the outside perspective. Someone who comes with fresh eyes, looks from a different direction and says – you could do it this way instead” (Linus)

“What you absolutely can’t replace [with an internal PR professional, compared to a PR consultant] is the outsider perspective. It only takes a few months, or six months, of being with an organization or a corporation to be completely co-opted and totally lose the outsider perspective” (Karolina)

“We live in something of an artificial world. We come in with a helicopter perspective and have lots of opinions, and build our assessments on the limited insight we have, and our common sense. And that’s fine, because it’s what [the clients] pay for” (Rebecca)

Getting too close to a single client, or a sector, is undesirable because it limits this broad view. For example, several consultants expressed concerns about how they might be too entrenched in the public sector, and that this has eroded both concrete competencies and their general ability to provide valuable advice.

“To improve my work in the public sector, I should work more with the private sector too. (...) otherwise I’ll become ‘one of them’ in the end (...). I have become so tunnel-sighted over five years here, that I might have become slightly cowardly in the advice I give (...). (...) I should move a bit more freely [between projects]” (Niklas)

### **4.3.3 Proactively proposing projects and driving action**

In addition to contributing an outside perspective, a key part of the job is to proactively pitch new ideas and actions to clients. This is done throughout the consulting engagement – from the start-up meeting to the wrap-up phase, where project follow-up discussions are used as springboards for next-step ideas and new projects. While such proactivity has immediate commercial benefits, it is primarily framed as an important and natural part of how the PR consultants serve clients. The client often expects them to be proactive, and through this proactivity, the consultants are involved in defining both problems and solutions.

“If we think a client is a little slow about coming up with things, we usually pretty quickly – maybe already at the first meeting when we’re just being congratulated for signing an agreement – already then we bring 3-5 ideas about things we think they should do” (Agnes)

“I think it is incredibly important to stay within the confines of what is considered okay for a public agency, for example, but that is often a great deal more than they initially think themselves. So we can push them quite far, and do a lot more than they might think at first” (Jan)

Indeed, some consultants even frame proactivity and creating action as primary contributions to their clients.

“If you engage a PR agency, by definition, you engage a blowtorch [that pushes for proactive communication]. You create a structure that constantly reminds you that you should communicate more. (...) People don’t hire us because they want a relaxed work environment. They hire us for results. (...) work won’t become calmer when you hire us. On the contrary, it will create a lot more work. But the outcome is great” (Karolina)



#### **4.3.4 The importance of communication is underappreciated**

According to the consultants, communication is strategically vital and key to organizational success, and the PR consultant has an important role to play. However, this is misunderstood by other actors in society, and the profession is often treated with unfair suspicion – especially in the media.

“It’s as if there is something fishy about needing help to communicate. ‘Why don’t you just tell it like it is?’ – that, so to speak, is the attitude. (...) The image of an organization is the product of reality – what we actually do – and how we communicate it. You can’t remove any of the two. You can’t put makeup on a pig indefinitely, but if you don’t put make-up on the pig at all, well then...” (Gabriella)

This perceived primacy of communication holds also when there are complicating factors at play. This was particularly apparent when the consultants spoke about the public sector. For example, some consultants acknowledged that opinion-making among public agencies is considered controversial – yet argued for their own unproblematic understanding of it.

“I think it’s disappointing that public agencies don’t express more opinions. But at the same time, I understand that it can be complicated sometimes. (...) often I feel like, in my role, that I’m a [work]horse that’s like OKAY NOW LET’S GO. (...) I feel like, goddamn it, you have a great thing here (...) but then they hold back. (...) I absolutely think that public agencies should... it’s their damn duty to communicate, to... do their job. Anything else would be a waste of taxpayer money” (Linus)

### **4.4 How PR consultants adapt to clients**

While the fundamental craft is largely the same across clients, adaptation is also seen as a natural aspect of PR consulting (4.4.1). The consultants adapt to the public and private sectors in two main ways – by rhetorically framing their work in different ways (4.4.2), and by adapting the social aspects of what they do (4.4.3). In all, however, managing both public and private clients at once is unproblematic (4.4.4).

#### **4.4.1 Adaptation is a natural part of consulting**

Although the craft is fundamentally the same across clients, the consultants also acknowledged that adaptation is an inherent part of their role.

“Of course, as a consultant you have to be the one to adapt. That’s the way it is” (Per)

“We are a service industry. At the end of the day, the client is always right” (Ida)

Specifically in relation to the public and private sectors, this was reflected in two main categories of adaptation practices, presented in the next sections.

#### **4.4.2 Adapting how the craft is framed**

The first way the consultants adapt to clients is to rhetorically frame aspects of their craft in different ways. Several respondents described how they use different vocabularies in the two sectors, to “speak

the same language” as the clients (Agnes). In both pitching processes and projects, the consultants adapt how they describe project aims, problems and solutions, as well as their own toolkit. In this way, they are able to convey their understanding of the client’s preconditions and complexities. This helps to create trust and legitimacy in the client-consultant relationship.

“[We] call [our craft] different things. We call it ‘communication’ instead of ‘marketing’ [in the public sector]. We don’t say ‘advertising’ but... ‘informing the public’. But the actual craft, what we do, is very similar” (Moa)

“The key is to understand that the dynamic is different [when a public client wants to communicate] than when a company wants to do it, so that you can give advice and express yourself in the right way” (Christina)

“We have to show that we understand the world a public agency lives in. (...) If you show this kind of understanding, it increases the confidence they have in us – they understand that they have hired the right consultants” (Agnes)

In addition, the consultants frame their advice in different ways, depending on what the client is perceived to expect or need. Among public clients, for example, the consultants often explicitly relate their advice and its underlying rationale to the client’s formal political instruction – with the purpose of making it easier to buy into, act on, and justify. Among private clients, where internal politics matter less than action, advice is instead often packaged to signal progress. For example, a common practice is to conclude client meetings and presentations with “next steps” for the project.

“If you have a lot of experience, like me... At first you don’t understand, but then you do – we always refer back to the political instruction very clearly [when working with public clients]. (...) You have to learn those mannerisms. What do we need to proceed here? I think you always have to refer back to the instruction. (...) That’s where we find power to drive other matters forward” (Christina)

Indeed, these framing techniques even extend to the consultants as individuals, and how they describe themselves and their backgrounds differently depending on the client.

“If I were to meet [a public client] I wouldn’t emphasize my financial background and that I primarily work with financial communication, but rather the broader communication and my understanding of society. Of course, this is always important, but I’d perhaps underscore it more” (Simon)

#### **4.4.3 Adapting social aspects of the craft**

The consultants also adjust a range of social aspects to suit the perceived expectations of their clients. Several respondents highlighted how the public and private sectors attract different kinds of people, with different personalities and ways of acting, and that this is something the consultants must take into account. Clothing was a frequently mentioned example.

“I wouldn’t want to come over-dressed to a meeting at a public agency, because then they’d probably feel that ‘these are expensive consultants’. You want to adapt. In the same way, I wouldn’t want to go laid back and chill to a private equity firm” (Benjamin)

“We had a special meeting [before a pitch to a public client] to decide, what are we going to wear? We couldn’t wear suits. So we had to dress down” (Rebecca)

In some cases, this extended also to conduct and manners of speech.

“We try to dress down if we’re attending [meetings with public agency experts] (...) so that we don’t (...) seem like snazzy Stockholm consultants. Sometimes we also think about dialects, when we have meetings out in the country... it can be better to use the consultants who come from smaller cities than those who speak a Stockholm dialect, for credibility” (Henrik)

“All public agencies have different brands... (...) Of course, [client A] has a different dress code, different culture, than [client B] would have. So yes, I (...) adapt the way I talk and so on” (Niklas)

#### **4.4.4 Switching between clients is easy**

Although public and private clients each require adaptation, moving between these clients on a daily basis is unproblematic. All respondents refuted suggestions that this might be an issue, except in very rare circumstances, for example when a consultant has to attend two client meetings with different dress codes during the same day. In all, however, switching between work with public and private clients is trivial.

“I think that it’s surprisingly easy to move between them, there is no huge chasm after all. Maybe it gets easier over the years with a bit of experience” (Agnes)

## 4.5 List of codes

In this section, the fifteen inductively identified themes above are associated with code numbers. In table 5 below, they are presented in the order they appear in the analysis.

Code number	Code name
1	Clients in the public and private sectors are distinct
2	Understanding client sectors is critical for success
3	Staffing to projects based on background and interests
4	Using strategies to learn about client sectors
5	Managing several, usually different clients at once
6	Exposure to both sectors builds capabilities and enables knowledge transfer
7	Contributing an outside perspective
8	Daily work at the consultancy office
9	The fundamental craft is the same across client sectors
10	The importance of communication is underappreciated
11	Adaptation is a natural part of consulting
12	Adapting how the craft is framed
13	Adapting social aspects of the craft
14	Proactively proposing projects and driving action
15	Switching between clients is easy

**Table 5: List of codes.**

# 5. Analysis

*In this section, we apply our analytical framework to understanding how PR consultants respond to the institutionally pluralistic context created by their clients. The analysis is conducted in three main steps (5.1), and the outcome is a new model for how PR consultants respond to the co-existence of their own logic and a single client logic (5.2).*

## 5.1 PR consultants' responses to institutional pluralism

As described in section 2.3.4 (and visualized there in figure 6), the analysis is conducted in three main steps. First, we lay the foundation by analyzing the PR consultants' adherence to client logics (5.1.1). Next, we analyze their adherence to their own professional logic (5.1.2). Finally, we analyze how the consultants respond to the co-existence of a single client logic and their own professional logic (5.1.3). A data structure which visually links codes 1-15 with the analytical themes and dimensions in this section is found in appendix 4.

### 5.1.1 Adherence to client logics

All respondents described differences between clients in the public and private sectors, spanning seven dimensions (code 1; full list in appendix 7). While acknowledging that the public-private split is a simplification, we see clear examples of how the ideal-type, macro level logics (Thornton et al., 2012; appendix 1) are instantiated at the micro level, supporting the notion that different client logics are at play. Hence, managing different clients can be understood as a matter of managing institutional pluralism. We conclude that the research context conceptualization (figure 3) is validated by the empirical data, and thereby sufficient for analytical traction.

Our data suggests that PR consultants actively *strive to be familiar with client logics* (codes 1-7; second-order theme 1). At the familiar level, the consultants understand the client logic (codes 2-6) – it is available. At the same time, they are able to retain an outside perspective (code 7) – it is only moderately accessible (i.e. moderately top-of-mind), and hence not automatically activated.

The undesirability of being novice with a client logic is empirically reflected in the importance of understanding client sectors (code 2), the path-dependent way consultants are selected for projects (code 3), and the active strategies used to develop sector-specific knowledge (code 4). To move beyond novice adherence to a client logic, the consultant must build its availability (Thornton et al., 2012) – i.e. gain exposure to and build knowledge about the logic. This aspect of becoming familiar is facilitated by how the consultants have several, usually different kinds of clients at once (code 5) – their inter-organizational mobility – which exposes them to different rationalities as part of their daily work (Brodnik & Brown, 2017). Brodnik and Brown (2017) also suggest that as boundary spanners, the consultants can strategically transmit information about logics across organizational boundaries, both to clients and to fellow consultants within the firm. We find empirical support for this proposal in strategies such as ongoing internal knowledge-sharing (code 4), as well as the general perception that the consultants enhance their capabilities through exposure to multiple sectors (code 6). Thus, it appears that the PR consultant role, in itself, is conducive to building the availability of – and hence familiarity with – different client logics.

That the consultants strive to remain familiar, and avoid identifying with client logics, is apparent in how they value their outside perspective and avoid becoming overly embedded, or “co-opted”, by the client logic (Karolina, code 7). Such co-option can be understood in terms of high accessibility (and subsequent automatic activation). When a consultant’s context gets too influenced by a single client logic, this logic will come to mind more easily than alternative logics – and hence erode their outside perspective (cf. controlled attention, Thornton et al., 2012).

In sum, the intermediate state of familiarity with client logics is preferred, and inherently facilitated in the PR consultant role.

### 5.1.2 Adherence to the PR consultants’ own logic

The presence of a professional logic is reflected in two main aspects: that the consultants describe the craft as fundamentally the same across all clients (code 9), and that they give primacy to their own understanding of communication and consulting, even when faced with alternative viewpoints from client logics (code 10). Again, we conclude that the research context conceptualization (figure 3) is validated by the empirical data.

Codes 8-10 suggest that the consultants usually *identify with their own professional logic* (second-order theme 2). Given that a professional logic is at play, and that the PR consultants act under its influence, it follows that this logic must be available to them. In terms of accessibility, individuals who are embedded in an institutional logic are likely to invoke knowledge from that logic (Brodnik & Brown, 2017). In their capacity as PR consultants, our respondents are physically embedded in a professional setting (code 8). This high embeddedness implies that their professional logic is highly accessible – i.e. that contextual factors render this logic top-of-mind (Thornton et al., 2012) – and hence that the consultants tend to identify with it (Pache & Santos, 2013a). Indeed, Pache & Santos (2013a) themselves identify professions as powerful conduits for identification. Most notably, our respondents maintained the basic assumption that communication and opinion-making are strategically paramount, and usually unproblematic, even when faced with other views. Some respondents explicitly upheld a positive and straightforward view of communication even when acknowledging complicating factors – emphasizing the centrality of communication in how the consultants interpret organizational reality and how to succeed (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999).

Thus, we conclude that while PR consultants strive for familiarity with client logics, they tend to be identified with their own professional logic.

### 5.1.3 PR consultants’ responses to client logics

Building from the findings in the two previous sections, our data suggests that the typical response to a single client logic is an *adaptation of the professional logic to the client logic through selective coupling* (aggregate dimension 1), as explained below. This response is enacted in the aforementioned situation when the PR consultant is familiar with the client logic and identified with the professional logic.

On a fundamental level, nearly all consultants perceive their work as similar across client sectors – ranging from project processes to final deliveries (code 9). However, our data also revealed that adaptation is perceived as a natural part of the work (code 11), and that the consultants customize aspects of their work to build legitimacy (codes 12-13). This suggests that the consultants combine

their own logic with selected elements of the client logic. In other words, they respond by combining the two logics through *selective coupling* (Pache & Santos, 2013a), in the form of *surface-level adaptation through symbolic practices* (second-order theme 3) where most aspects of their own logic are retained. This aligns with Pache and Santos's (2013a) argument that familiarity with a logic allows an individual to draw on selected logic-congruent practices in pursuit of legitimacy.

Two symbolic adaptation practices were found in the data. First, the consultants adapt how the craft is framed (code 12), including rhetorically adjusting the framing of the client's context, aims, problems and solutions, as well as the consultants' own backgrounds. Second, the consultants adapt social aspects of the craft (code 13), including clothing, manners of speech and conduct. Theoretically, we interpret these as what Brodnik and Brown (2017) refer to as using "discipline-specific language, customs or cues" (p. 40) that connect new cognitive shortcuts to the clients' existing interpretations. The consultants thereby attune their solutions and themselves to the client's logic, and legitimize their approach by mediating the competing demands of their own logic and that of the client. In other words, as suggested by Brodnik and Brown (2017), they reinterpret their own approach to fit the client logic, in order to make its rationality evident. The consultants can thus steer their clients' attention toward specific problems, actions, and potential solutions (Brodnik & Brown, 2017) – i.e. *nudge them towards action* (second-order theme 4). This aspect is evident in how the consultants actively nudge their clients to communicate more (code 14) – a central matter of their professional logic. This explains from a theoretical perspective how familiarity with client logics is considered valuable (codes 1-7) – it enables surface-level adaptation, which in turn enables the consultants to drive action among clients (code 14). As suggested by Pache and Santos (2013a), the familiar level of adherence with a logic grants room for strategic action: while the consultants' embeddedness in the client logic is low, and their identity is not associated with it, they are knowledgeable enough about the client logic to secure legitimacy through selective logic-congruent practices.

The selective coupling response is thus enabled by familiarity with client logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a), which, in turn, is enabled by the PR consultants' boundary spanning characteristics (Brodnik & Brown, 2017) – their broad working knowledge of different areas, and inter-organizational mobility (see section 5.1.1). This renders them "attuned to the social construction and information coding schemes of actors with different backgrounds" (Brodnik & Brown, 2017, p. 40). In addition, given that our respondents underscored that working in multiple sectors enhances their general capabilities as PR consultants (code 6), we interpret the use of surface level adaptation practices as a general skill that can be built by working with different types of clients. Through exposure to different types of clients, the consultants build their rhetorical skills and context sensitivity (Brodnik & Brown, 2017). In other words – boundary spanning characteristics not only enable familiarity with client logics, but also build skills to respond to client logics in general.

In all, we summarize the role taken by the consultants in cases where they are identified with their own logic, and familiar with that of the client, as that of a *strategic advisor* – a legitimate and trusted advisor that maintains a strategically empowered outsider perspective. This response strategy – which emerged from the empirical data – supports Pache & Santos's (2013a, p. 22) description<sup>7</sup> of what

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<sup>7</sup> For readability, "Logic A" and "Logic B" have in the coming quote been replaced with "client logic" and "own logic".

happens when an individual combines logics through selective coupling: “their ability to display adherence with [the client logic’s] demands may allow them to gain approval with the [client], while pushing for [their own logic’s] values and norms. Their knowledge about [the client logic] may further allow them to sell [their own logic’s] values, norms, and practices by connecting them with those promoted by [the client logic]”. Interestingly, Pache & Santos (2013a) argue that this kind of combination only comes into play if the client logic (with which the consultants are familiar) is perceived to *dominate* their own logic (with which they are identified) – which is supported by the finding that the consultants see adaptation as a natural part of their work (code 11). In other words, the client logic appears to dominate the consultant logic in the client-consultant relationship.

Our data also indicated how PR consultants respond to a client logic when they are either novice or identified with it. As concluded in section 5.1.1, PR consultants actively strive toward familiarity with client logics – which therefore underpins the typical response to client logics outlined above. Being novice or identified with a client logic is perceived as disadvantageous (codes 1-7, section 5.1.1), since the responses associated with these conditions entail negative perceived effects on the consultants’ ability to create value.

Our findings suggest that being novice with a client logic leads the consultant to *ignore* the client logic – an unconscious non-response, due to a lack of awareness of the logic’s influence (Pache & Santos, 2013a). This response implies the risk of lacking trust and legitimacy (code 2), and thereby becoming an *illegitimate advisor* to the client.

On the other hand, our respondents described the dangers of becoming co-opted and losing the outside perspective (code 7; section 5.1.1). We interpret this as a compliance response (Pache & Santos, 2013a) – the full adoption of the client logic. This response can be understood in terms of high accessibility, resulting from high day-to-day exposure to the client logic. Logic identification reinforces the taken-for-grantedness of the logic (Pache & Santos, 2013a), and entails automatic and unconscious activation, as the consultant loses the controlled attention associated with their outside perspective. As controlled attention is necessary to selectively couple elements of both logics, they also lose the desirable ability to drive action (code 14). In sum, our findings indicate that becoming identified and responding to client logics through compliance is associated with a *co-opted advisor* role.

#### **5.1.4 The co-existence of multiple client sectors**

Lastly, we briefly touch upon a finding that emerged from the data – the fact that most PR consultants manage clients within both the private and the public sectors at the same time (code 5), implying the need to routinely navigate across institutional spheres. Our findings suggest that altering between clients is perceived as simple and straightforward (code 15), and that they selectively enact aspects of each client logic depending on the context (as described in section 5.1.3).

Since most elements of the PR consultant’s own logic are retained, the resulting, combined logic can be interpreted as an adapted, *sector-specific version of their own logic*, which is continually constructed and reconstructed over time (Thornton et al., 2012) as the consultant gains more experience. By extension, this suggests that serving different types of clients on a day-to-day basis (code 5) is a matter of managing the co-existence of several adapted, sector-specific professional logics (e.g. one for the public sector, and one for the private sector), and enacting them each depending on



the client. Thus, our findings indicate that PR consultants purposely segment their compliance with the adapted versions of their logic over time, and between different clients (Pache & Santos, 2013a). We interpret this as logic activation, depending on how accessible each adapted logic is in a given situation – in other words, that the adapted logics are activated as the consultants perceive salient cues within the client contexts (Thornton et al., 2012).

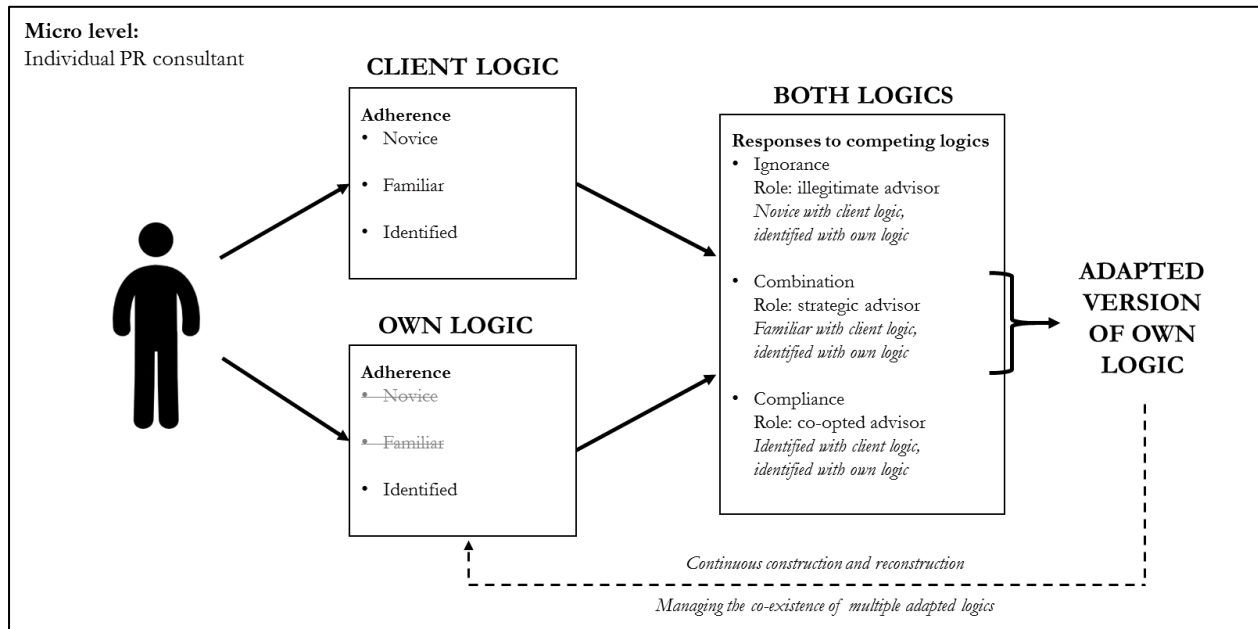
## **5.2 A model of how PR consultants respond to institutional pluralism**

Below, we synthesize our findings, and propose a model of how an individual PR consultant responds to the co-existence of their own logic with a single client logic. The model presents three responses, which correspond to the three possible levels of adherence to a client logic (novice, familiar, identified). In accordance with our empirical findings, the model presumes that the PR consultant is identified with their own logic. The responses described below are visualized in model 1, and the key concepts are summarized in table 6 beneath.

If the consultant is novice with the client logic – i.e. they have very limited experience with it – they ignore the client logic (Pache & Santos, 2013a). In this case, the consultant has not yet understood the client’s information coding schemes and rationalities (Brodnik & Brown, 2017), and therefore cannot adapt their craft to suit the client. This results in a lack of trust and capabilities, and an illegitimate advisor role.

If the PR consultant is familiar with the client logic – i.e. they understand it, but remain at an arm’s length distance – the response is to combine the logics through selective coupling (Pache & Santos, 2013a). By partially enacting the client logic, through surface-level adaptation practices, the consultant is able to build legitimacy (Pache & Santos, 2013a), as well as re-code their own ideas and approaches so that they make sense to the client (Brodnik & Brown, 2017). The consultant is thereby able to nudge clients toward specific actions – and attain a strategic advisor role. The selective coupling response results in an adapted, sector-specific version of their own logic, which is constructed and reconstructed over time (Thornton et al., 2012) as the consultant gains more experience. The consultants manage the co-existence of several of these adapted versions of their logics, and enact them each depending on the client context.

Finally, if the PR consultant is identified with the client logic – i.e. they are significantly more exposed to this particular client logic than other client logics, and they have deep knowledge of it – they comply with it (Pache & Santos, 2013a). In this case, the client logic is highly top-of-mind, and therefore readily activated. While this may not harm the consultant in terms of legitimacy (Pache & Santos, 2013a), it erodes their outside perspective, as well as the general competencies they would otherwise gain by serving a multitude of clients. The outcome is a co-opted advisor role, with a (perceived) reduced ability to create value for the client.



**Model 1: Model of how PR consultants respond to client logics.**

Level of adherence to client logic	Response to client logic	Role
<i>Novice</i>	<i>Ignorance</i>	<i>Illegitimate advisor</i>
Availability: None/Low Accessibility: None Activation: None  Actively limited by the consultants	Lack of adaptation and activation of client logic	Failure to impact clients due to lack of legitimacy and trust
<i>Familiar</i>	<i>Combination</i>	<i>Strategic advisor</i>
Availability: High Accessibility: Medium Activation: Medium  Actively sought after by the consultants and facilitated by boundary spanning characteristics	Selective coupling with own professional logic by drawing from elements of the client logic through symbolic adaptation practices	Customize behavior to influence which problems are attended and what solutions are considered, actively nudging clients to action
<i>Identified</i>	<i>Compliance</i>	<i>Co-opted advisor</i>
Availability: High Accessibility: High Activation: High  Actively limited by the consultants	Excessive acceptance of the values, norms, and practices prescribed by a client logic due to over-embeddedness	Loss of outsider perspective and strategic empowerment, resulting in a (perceived) lack of value creation

**Table 6: Responses to client logics, assuming identification with own professional logic.**

## 6. Discussion

*This section relates our analytical findings back to the model of individual-level responses that we started from, explaining how and why our findings diverge (6.1), and where the new model is situated along the socialized-strategic continuum (6.2). Our broader contribution to the literature is described in section 7.*

### 6.1 Advances from the original model

Starting from Pache and Santos's (2013a) final predictive model (presented earlier, in figure 5), our findings revealed three individual-level responses to institutional pluralism in the PR consultancy context. The responses that arise when the consultant is novice or familiar with the client logic align with the predictions in Pache and Santos's (2013a) original model. When the consultant is identified with the client logic, however, our model *differs* from that of Pache and Santos (2013a). In our model, when a PR consultant identifies with both a client logic and their own logic, we see a compliance response (Pache & Santos, 2013a) associated with a co-opted advisor role. In Pache & Santos's (2013a) original model, however, the predicted response is instead a type of combination where the individual synthesizes the two logics into a new, coherent logic, based on new norms and values. While Pache and Santos's (2013a) model partly predicts similar responses as our findings, they are expressed in special ways in the PR consulting context. We have therefore proposed three advisor roles – illegitimate, strategic and co-opted – that arise when a PR consultant responds to client logics. In particular, we have developed the concept of selective coupling within the consultancy domain, by describing how selective coupling can be achieved through surface-level adaptation practices, in pursuit of strategic aims.

We contend that the divergence between our model and Pache and Santos's (2013a) can be attributed to the previously unexplored context of PR consulting. As discussed in section 1.1, PR consultants (and consultants in general) face a unique institutional context, characterized by a dynamic environment of multiple client logics, which co-exist with their own professional logic. As stated in section 5.1.3, our findings suggest that the PR consultant's logic is perceived to be subordinate to the client's logic within the client-consultant relationship: consultants are, in essence, in the business of adaptation (code 11). In the vocabulary of Pache and Santos's original model (2013a; figure 5), the two logics are characterized by *low hybridity* – i.e. one logic dominates the other.

Interestingly, for the combinations identified-novice and identified-familiar (but no other combinations), Pache and Santos (2013a) propose two responses for each, and argue that these depend on the level of hybridity between the logics. Our findings, although specific to the PR consulting context, suggest that responses to the third combination in the same row – identified-identified – might also be affected by the hybridity of the logics. If so, the combination response predicted by Pache and Santos (2013a) would play out primarily in situations with high hybridity – i.e. where the logics are perceived to be of equal strength – and the compliance response predicted by our model would instead emerge in situations with low hybridity. This does not seem unreasonable. For example, imagine a social entrepreneur who is identified with both a corporate and a community logic. In a context where both logics are at play, but one dominates the other – for example, in a pitch meeting

with a venture capitalist – it seems plausible that she would enact a compliance response, where she foregrounds the corporate logic in its entirety, and retains the community logic in the background.

In sum, our findings indicate that individual responses to institutional pluralism in the PR consultancy context partly differ from those predicted by Pache & Santos (2013a), and previous research. This has necessitated new theorizing, and motivates the new model proposed above (model 1; section 5.2). We have thereby contributed to the literature on individual-level responses to institutional pluralism by extending it to the unique (PR) consultancy context. In addition, we have suggested that Pache and Santos's (2013a) original model – which was based on a synthesis of the literature thus far – might warrant further elaboration, specifically in cases where an individual is identified with both Logic A and Logic B under low hybridity.

## 6.2 Socialized and strategic dimensions

As discussed in section 2.1.3, the existing literature encompasses a range of perspectives that conceptualize individuals along a spectrum from *socialized representatives* to *strategic users* of logics. We have shown that the characteristics of the PR consultants – their outside perspective, in combination with their familiarity with client logics – endow them with room for strategic action, through selective coupling of the client logic with their own professional logic. While we acknowledge the role of socialization in the form of different levels of adherence to logics, our findings suggest that consultants can mobilize their own and the client logics to accomplish their own goals. Thus, while our analytical framework incorporated aspects that are both socialized and strategic, after applying it to our empirical findings, we find that the resulting model in fact leans primarily towards the strategic users perspective.

## 7. Concluding remarks

*This section returns to the research question and explicates our answer (7.1). We then outline our theoretical contribution (7.2), the practical implications of our findings (7.3), and finally limitations and suggestions for future research (7.4).*

### 7.1 Answer to the research question

This thesis has explored how PR consultants respond to institutional pluralism at the individual level, responding to calls for further research in an increasingly prominent area within institutional logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a; Jaumier et al., 2017; Brandl & Bullinger, 2017). Specifically, we have addressed the following research question:

**How do individual PR consultants respond to the institutional pluralism that arises between themselves and clients who are embedded in different institutional contexts?**

As our answer to the question, we have developed a model of how PR consultants respond to client logics (section 5.2), by extending and adapting the individual-level response model by Pache and Santos (2013a). Our model outlines three responses, which are contingent on the PR consultant's level of adherence (Pache & Santos, 2013a) to the client logic, and that the PR consultant identifies with their own professional logic. If *novice* with a client logic, we find that PR consultants *ignore* the logic, taking an *illegitimate advisor* role. If *familiar* with the client logic, PR consultants *combine* the client logic with their own logic through *selective coupling*, taking a *strategic advisor* role. Lastly, if *identified*, we find that PR consultants *comply* with the client logic, taking a *co-opted advisor* role. Both our empirical and analytical findings indicate that PR consultants actively strive for the familiar level of adherence to client logics – to understand, but not wholly accept, the “rules of the game” faced by their clients (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 2).

### 7.2 Theoretical contribution

By answering the research question, we have contributed to the literature on individual-level responses to institutional pluralism. Specifically, we have extended the literature to the context of consultants in general, and PR consultants in particular – an area that has received strikingly little attention within the logics literature. We have shown that the unique context of a PR consultant, who moves between different clients (and their logics) as part of their fundamental role, implies special – and partially different – responses to institutional pluralism than suggested by previous literature. Hence, we have proposed an adapted model for the PR consultancy context. By doing so, as discussed in section 6, we contribute to the logics literature with an extended understanding both of the (PR) consultant role, and of individual-level responses to pluralism in general.

Our work also contributes to addressing the field's persistent “people” problem (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Lok et al., 2017) by elaborating on the instrumentalized conceptualization of consultants as carriers of management ideas (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). By showing how PR consultants respond to institutional pluralism through the selective coupling of elements from

their own logic and their clients' logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a), we elaborate on *how* PR consultants are able to act as carriers that translate ideas and practices across client and institutional borders (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). Similar problems and solutions are attended across client contexts, but in order to make their rationale evident to each client, the PR consultants re-frame and attune the problems and solutions to each client's assumptions, values, and beliefs. Thus, relating to this string of literature, we have shown from the PR consultants' own point of view how the process of carrying ideas across institutional and organizational borders takes place.

Finally, while PR consulting is a distinct setting, we propose that our findings could be partly generalized to other domains through the extraction of transferable concepts and principles (Gioia et al., 2013). To this end, von Nordenflycht (2010) proposes that PR consultancies are *neo-professional service firms* who are conceptually similar to certain other types of professional service firms – especially management consultancies and advertising agencies. Particularly, previous work often assumes that theories from management consulting apply to PR consulting (e.g. von Platen, 2015), indicating that the reverse could also be true. Hence, we suggest that our findings could be partly transferable to other neo-professional service domains, and management consulting in particular.

### 7.3 Practical implications

By studying PR consultants, we shed light on an industry that has been characterized by distrust and suspicion (Grandien, 2017; Tyllström, 2013; Larsson, 2007). Media representations have painted a consistently negative picture of the PR consultancy industry (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013), and in Sweden, more than half of participants in general surveys express poor or little trust in PR consultants (Larsson, 2007). Throughout these critical accounts, and in most academic work, the perspective of the PR consultants themselves is notably rare. By studying how PR consultants work with multiple kinds of clients, we have provided an empirical account, from the consultants' point of view, through which external observers can assess their understanding of concerns around the profession. Therefore, we contribute with knowledge and understanding not only to academia, and to the PR consultants themselves, but also to “surrounding communities” (Greenwood et al., 2017) such as clients, the media, and the wider society.

Importantly, the fact that PR consultants nudge clients towards attending certain problems and solutions should not be interpreted as deceptive or insidious. In contrast, our respondents view this phenomenon as vital to their profession, and an important way they create value for their clients. Notably, respondents who found themselves in a co-opted advisor role (i.e. they had become identified with the client logic) raised explicit concerns about their reduced ability to push for new ideas and thereby create value for the client: “I have become so tunnel-sighted over five years [of working mainly with public clients], that I might have become slightly cowardly in the advice I give” (Niklas, code 6). A fundamental purpose of PR consulting, and indeed consulting in general, is to bring an outside perspective and bridge different ways of understanding by attuning information, problems and solutions to clients. This, again, suggests that nudging clients is not deceptive but rather a central part of how consultants create value.

In addition to opening a window into the PR consulting profession, our model provides practitioners with some useful tools. First, like Pache and Santos (2013a), we contend that an

important contribution is that our model provides a framework for considering hiring and socializing strategies. Our model is specifically adapted to the PR consultancy industry, and perhaps to “weakly professionalized” neo-professional service firms in general (von Nordenflycht, 2010). Our findings suggest that being familiar with a client’s logic (rather than novice or identified) is desirable for fruitful collaborations – and that organizations should carefully consider their hiring and socialization processes accordingly. In terms of hiring, PR consultancies should seek to recruit consultants with experience from diverse backgrounds and sectors that are relevant to the firm. In terms of socialization, PR consultancies could adjust their staffing strategies and development plans to ensure that individual consultants are continually exposed to a range of different clients. They can thereby build experience, including rhetorical skills and context sensitivity, while avoiding excessive specialization and the risk of identifying with one client type.

## 7.4 Limitations and future research

Our proposed theoretical model is not without limitations. Since we rely markedly on Pache and Santos (2013a), like them, we have presented a simplified view of institutional influences “for the sake of clarity and parsimony” (p. 30). We recognize that a PR consultant’s responses to institutional pluralism may also be driven by factors such as their capacity to perceive (cognitively and emotionally) institutional contradictions between their own logic and the client logic (Voronov & Yorks, 2015), and the degree to which the two logics are perceived as incompatible (Pache & Santos, 2013a). Yet, we maintain that the factors included in the study are the most important drivers of how PR consultants respond to competing institutional logics.

Our model also does not account for how micro-level responses to institutional logics ultimately aggregate to organizational-level responses and beyond. It neither addresses how such aggregation processes unfold, nor the social interactions underpinning them. Furthermore, while we identify two categories of symbolic adaptation practices, we do not immerse ourselves into the mechanisms by which the responses in our model unfold and are sustained – for example through institutional work (Creed et al., 2010; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Similarly, this paper ignores the process through which individuals lose or develop new identities, i.e. identity work (Creed et al., 2010), which plays a part in how they achieve identified adherence to logics (Pache & Santos, 2013a). Future research needs to explore how these mechanics relate to the responses to institutional pluralism proposed in our model. Lastly, future research should explore how PR consultants relate to multiple client logics. This paper only briefly touches upon the co-existence of multiple clients in different sectors (section 5.1.4). Although outside the scope of this study, we believe studying the co-existence of multiple adapted versions of the professional logic could provide insights in how the PR consultants’ identities evolve (cf. Creed et al., 2010), and how their own logic develops. Future research should further explore how the adapted versions of the logic interact, how consultants respond to their co-existence over time, and how this affects the consultants’ identities.

Due to our deliberate intent to interview consultants with at least some experience from both the public and the private sector, and the subsequent limitations of our sample – where the least experienced interviewee had worked two years in the industry – all our respondents appeared to identify with their own professional logic. Hence, our model does not account for situations where a

PR consultant is novice or familiar with their own professional logic. We contend that this is rare, since professions tend to be powerful conduits for identification (Pache & Santos, 2013a). However, to enhance the model, future research should identify and study situations where consultants do not adhere as strongly to the professional logic – for example in the case of very junior employees.

Lastly, this is an explorative study in qualitative form, within the scope of a Master's thesis. Qualitative research generally uses smaller sample sizes, impeding generalizability across settings. Like Gioia et al. (2013), we uphold that it is possible to generalize from small samples by extracting transferable concepts, since structures and processes are not (completely) idiosyncratic across settings. Still, although outside the purpose and scope of this thesis, further research is necessary to confirm our findings and validate them in other settings. The conclusions drawn here open up several such settings – for example studying whether other types of professionals (cf. von Nordenflycht, 2010) respond to competing logics in a similar way.



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## 9. Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Ideal-type institutional logics

	Logic		
Dimension	<i>State</i>	<i>Professional</i>	<i>Corporation</i>
<i>Root metaphor</i>	Redistribution mechanism	Relational network	Hierarchy
<i>Sources of legitimacy</i>	Democratic participation	Personal expertise	Market position of firm
<i>Sources of authority</i>	Bureaucratic domination	Professional association	Top management
<i>Sources of identity</i>	Social & economic class	Association with quality of craft Personal reputation	Bureaucratic roles
<i>Basis of norms</i>	Status of interest group	Status in profession	Firm employment
<i>Basis of attention</i>	Citizenship membership	Status in profession	Status in hierarchy
<i>Basis of strategy</i>	Increase community good	Increase personal reputation	Increase size of firm
<i>Informal control mechanisms</i>	Backroom politics	Celebrity professionals	Organisational culture
<i>Economic system</i>	Welfare capitalism	Personal Capitalism	Managerial capitalism

Ideal-type institutional logics, as defined by Thornton et al. (2012).



## Appendix 2 – List of respondents

Pseudonym	Current role	Industry experience (years)	Share of private vs. public clients	Top management role at current company	Date of interview	Length of interview (minutes)	Participants
Agnes	Senior	13	65% - 35%	None	2018-02-16	58	Alktun, Svenonius
Benjamin	Junior	2	60% - 40%	None	2018-02-16	48	Alktun, Svenonius
Christina	Partner	>20*	90% - 10%	Current	2018-02-16	55	Alktun, Svenonius
Dan	Partner	25	75% - 25%	Current	2018-02-21	54**	Svenonius
Ellen	Partner	20	90% - 10%	None	2018-02-21	54**	Svenonius
Fredrik	Partner	25	50% - 50%	Former	2018-02-21	56	Svenonius
Gabriella	Senior	15	90% - 10%	None	2018-02-23	70	Svenonius
Henrik	Junior	4	10% - 90%	None	2018-02-26	63	Alktun, Svenonius
Ida	Partner	24	50% - 50%	Former	2018-02-26	57	Alktun, Svenonius
Jan	Partner	N/A*	25% - 75%	Former	2018-02-27	76	Alktun, Svenonius
Karolina	Partner	17	90% - 10%	Current	2018-03-02	50	Alktun, Svenonius
Linus	Senior	5	90% - 10%	None	2018-03-05	59	Alktun, Svenonius
Moa	Partner	6	40% - 60%	Current	2018-03-07	56	Svenonius
Niklas	Junior	5	25% - 75%	None	2018-03-28	65	Alktun, Svenonius
Olivia	Senior	10	10% - 90%	None	2018-04-03	53	Alktun, Svenonius
Per	Senior	17	50% - 50%	Former	2018-04-06	68	Alktun, Svenonius
Rebecca	Junior	6	80% - 20%	None	2018-04-13	56	Alktun, Svenonius
Simon	Senior	18	80% - 20%	None	2018-04-13	36	Alktun, Svenonius

\* Stated according to the request of the respondents.

\*\* Joint interview.

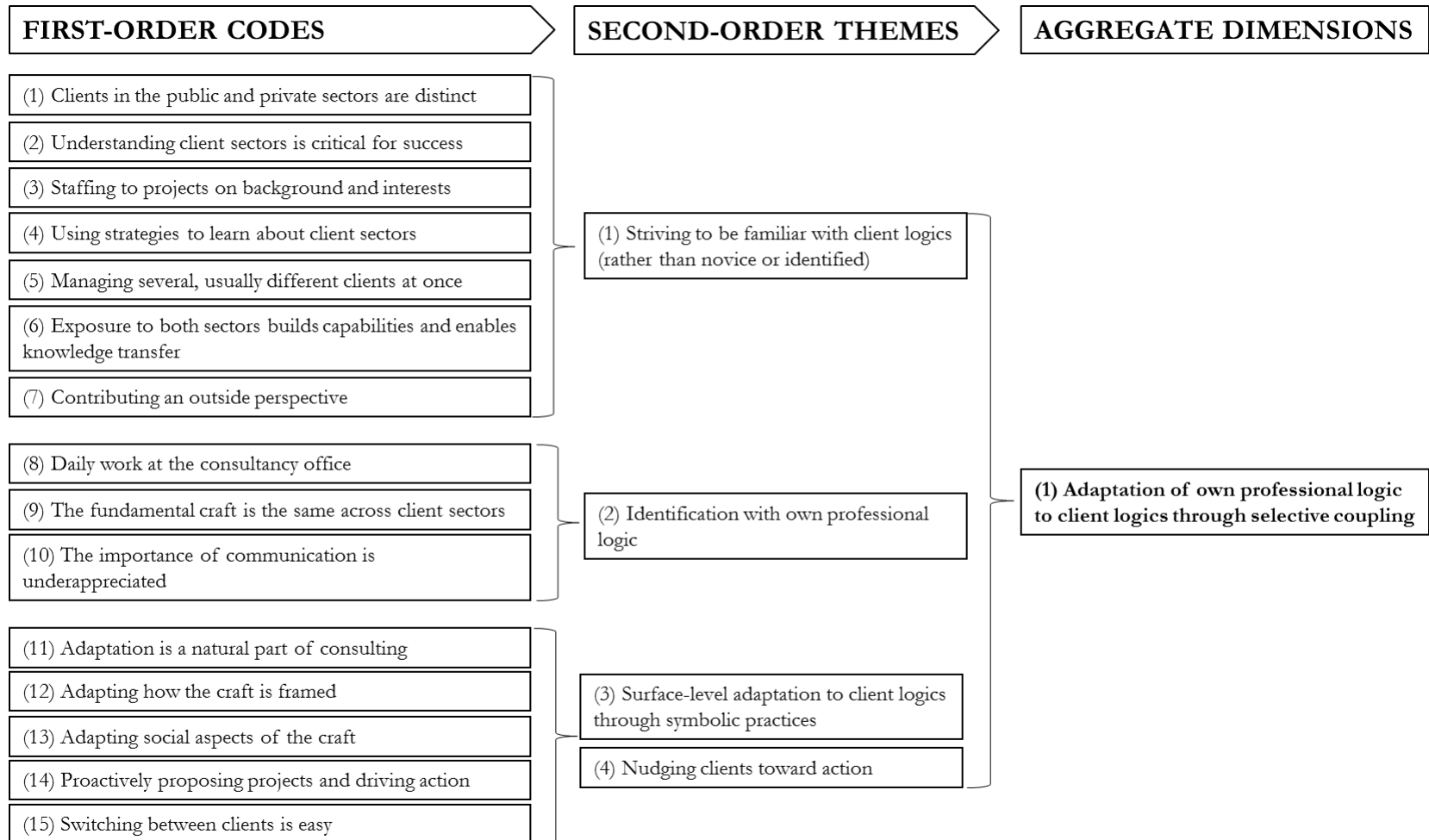
### Appendix 2: List of respondents.

## Appendix 3 – Interviewees and empirical codes

Inductively identified codes	Agnes	Benjamin	Christina	Dan	Ellen	Fredrik	Gabriella	Henrik	Ida	Jan	Karolina	Linus	Moa	Niklas	Olivia	Per	Rebecca	Simon	TOTAL
(1) Clients in the public and private sectors are distinct	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	18
(1.1) Purpose of communication: Service / Profit	X					X	X		X	X	X				X				7
(1.2) Decision-making: Political / Hierarchical	X	X	X				X	X				X	X	X		X	X		10
(1.3) Communication environment: More complex / Less complex			X	X	X		X	X	X	X			X	X			X	X	11
(1.4) Role of the media: Scrutiny / Publicity		X									X			X	X		X		5
(1.5) Consultant-client interaction: Transparency / Confidentiality			X		X		X	X				X			X			X	7
(1.6) Cost perspective: Expenses are (taxpayer) money / Time is money			X					X					X				X		4
(1.7) Project orientation: Process / Action	X		X	X	X	X						X	X	X			X		9
(2) Understanding client sectors is critical for success	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X				X	X	X	X	X	13
(3) Staffing to projects based on background and interests	X	X		X					X		X			X	X		X		8
(4) Using strategies to learn about client sectors				X		X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	9
(5) Managing several, usually different clients at once	X	X		X	X				X			X	X			X	X		9
(6) Exposure to both sectors builds capabilities and enables knowledge transfer			X	X	X		X		X	X	X			X	X		X	X	11
(7) Contributing an outside perspective	X										X	X	X	X	X		X		7
(8) Daily work at the consultancy office	X		X			X					X					X			5
(9) The fundamental craft is the same across client sectors	X	X		X	X			X	X	X		X	X			X	X		11
(10) The importance of communication is underappreciated			X				X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		10
(11) Adaptation is a natural part of consulting	X	X							X			X				X			5
(12) Adapting how the craft is framed	X		X						X				X	X	X		X	X	8
(13) Adapting social aspects of the craft		X	X					X						X			X	X	6
(14) Proactively proposing projects and driving action	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X					X	12
(15) Switching between clients is easy	X	X		X	X					X				X		X			7

Appendix 3: Interviewees and empirical codes.

## Appendix 4 – Analytical codes, themes and dimensions



Appendix 4: analytical codes, themes and dimensions.

## Appendix 5 – Interview guide – Main study – Version 1

### Opening questions

1. What does your organization do?
2. What is your role?
3. Age, years of experience as a PR consultant?
4. Experience from working with the public/private sector?

### Practices

5. What types of clients do you work with? (Split between private and public clients?)
6. What types of projects do you do? Concretely – any examples?
7. What types of roles do you (as a consultant) take in the projects? Any difference between private and public clients?
8. In what (hierarchical) level in the organization is your counterpart? Any differences between the sectors?
9. Why do you think public and private clients hire PR consultants? Any differences between the sectors?

### Difference in process

10. Do you perceive any differences between public and private clients?
11. (If need to probe deeper) Do you perceive any differences in:
  - a. Ways of working?
  - b. Expertise?
  - c. Ways of perceiving the world?
  - d. Ways of defining aims and goals?
  - e. Ways of controlling/governing/following up projects?

### Internal organizing and identity

12. Do the same consultants work with both private and public clients?
13. Why do you choose to work with either sector?
14. Are there any difference in approach/process depending on the sector? (e.g. process, profile, USP)
15. What is your own opinion about working with the sectors?

### Relationship to the client

16. How would you describe your relationship to public/private clients?
17. What do you do to gain trust?
18. Do you adapt depending on what client you work with?
19. What misunderstandings/conflicts can arise and how do you solve them? Any differences between the sectors?
20. How do you create value for the clients? Any differences between the sectors?
21. How do the projects develop (goal/processes/collaboration/relationship) over time? Any differences between the sectors?

### Project results/implications

22. Generally, do you feel that you can deliver maximum value to the clients? Any differences between the sectors?
23. What is the usual effect of the projects? Any differences between the sectors?
24. How do you think your firm affects clients in the two sectors?

### Last questions

25. Is there anything else that you'd like to share related to what we've talked about?

## Appendix 6 – Interview guide – Main study – Version 5

### Opening questions

1. Tell us about yourself – your profile, background, experience, etc.?
2. What is your role?
3. Age, years of experience as a PR consultant? Experience from working with the public/private sector?

### Differences

4. Are there any differences between public and private sector clients for you in the consultancy role?
5. If necessary to dig deeper:
  - a. Tasks/types of projects?
  - b. Way of working?
  - c. Expertise? Profile of the individuals who work in each sector?
  - d. Governance of you as consultants? (goals, aims, control, leading, follow-up)
6. How do you personally feel about working with private versus public clients?

### Adaptation

7. How come you work with the private and/or the private sector?
8. Are there any type of consultants/person who would work better or worse in each sector? Why?
9. Are there any differences in how you, as an individual, approach or act in a project depending on the sector?
10. If necessary to dig deeper:
  - a. What do you do to win trust?
  - b. How do you present your profile/the company's USP?
  - c. Any differences in process?
  - d. Are there any difference in how you create value, or what value you create?

### Co-existence of multiple client sectors

11. How has the share of private- and public clients on the organizational level developed over time?  
How have you thought strategically about that share?
12. How do you think it has affected your organization, and the individual consultants here, that you work with both private and public sector?
13. How has the share of private and public clients developed for you as a consultant over time? What are your thoughts around that?
14. How do you think it has affected you to have different types of clients?
15. What's it like to have clients in several sectors at the same time?

### Last questions

16. Is there anything else that you'd like to share related to what we've talked about?

## Appendix 7 – Perceived differences between public and private sector clients

Code	Description	Illustrative quotes
(1.1) Purpose of communication: Service / Profit	In the public sector, serving society is the reason to exist. Legitimacy is key to achieving this, and hence, communication is strategically critical. In the private sector, communication is instead tied to the bottom line, survival and growth.	<p><i>“Often, the value in the private sector is more bombastically concerned with brands and revenue. (...) While in the public sector, the value can be concerned with... in the end, that these organizations can fulfil the role they have in society, and deliver value in this capacity”</i> (Jan)</p> <p><i>“The currency for a public actor isn’t money, it’s legitimacy. You have to be legitimate to realize political decisions, or be an actor within society at all (...). (...) Private actors act within a market. And they’re supposed to sell (...). Of course, they also have to be legitimate and trustworthy, that’s why brands exist”</i> (Ida)</p>
(1.2) Decision-making: Political / Hierarchical	In public organisations, decisions are made through consensus-building and internal politics which leads to long and slow anchoring processes. In contrast, in the private sector, decisions are typically made more quickly and by empowered individuals, with limited regard for the rest of the organization.	<p><i>“In the private sector, it is more like - ‘I have the mandate to commission this [project], let’s go’ (...). But in the public sector this is much more (...) a democratic, sometimes frustrating process where everyone, everyone, everyone has opinions. Private clients are more like, (...) screw the organization”</i> (Moa)</p> <p><i>“Fundamentally, public agencies are politically governed organizations. (...) These kinds of organizations are known to be rather bothersome to navigate. Decision-making processes are longer, and there is perhaps a bit more internal politics (...) compared to the private sector”</i> (Agnes)</p>
(1.3) Communication environment: More complex / Less complex	Public sector clients act in a comparatively more complicated environment, with many rules and stakeholders to consider, and specific norms and values for appropriate communication. These clients thus tend to be more risk averse than private clients, and unwilling to engage in certain types of communication, such as public advocacy and overtly creative campaigns.	<p><i>“The private sector is typically more able to (...) run with things. A little less risk, and less sensitive content. Whereas the public sector needs to deliberate, think, weigh the different aspects a bit more”</i> (Moa)</p> <p><i>“It’s not about not being creative [in the public sector], because it’s absolutely about being creative, but you can’t think out of the box as much. You have to think inside the box. Which constraints does this organization</i></p>

		<p><i>have? Which constraints are set by the government, and who has set these constraints? What is [the client] supposed to do, and how do these constraints affect that?"</i> (Jan)</p>
<p>(1.4) Role of the media: Scrutiny / Publicity</p>	<p>Public clients tend to have a more reactive relationship with the media than private clients, and act in fear of scrutiny rather than in pursuit of effective communication. This fear is especially rooted in the sensitivities of tax funding. Similar complications were not described for the private sector.</p>	<p><i>"There is an excessive belief [in the public sector] that you should (...) focus on the negative, crisis management. And you don't have to, you shouldn't. (...) The journalist shouldn't be the recipient and target audience, the journalist is a channel to the citizens"</i> (Karolina)</p> <p><i>"[The public sector] is a bit too afraid of criticism sometimes. (...) That is often a... well, a somewhat odd approach, in our view. If we get criticized a bit, it isn't the end of the world. That thing about - all PR is good PR. You can really get something out there"</i> (Niklas)</p>
<p>(1.5) Consultant-client interaction: Transparent / Confidential</p>	<p>All official interactions between the consultants and their public clients are subject to transparency laws, which leads to additional caution and care in the consultancy process. Interaction with private clients, which is normally confidential, is not as sensitive.</p>	<p><i>"One of the biggest differences (...) is that the process is public. Not just the outcome. (...) [When consulting for] private companies we can try things out - what happens if we say this? (...) Push things a little and see what happens (...). But I never dare to say such things in public projects"</i> (Christina)</p> <p><i>"In all our communication [with public clients], we are reminded that, just so you know, this is public, so everything that is written is supposed to be correct and might be scrutinized. (...) So I'm very careful. We have a floodlight directed onto us"</i> (Olivia)</p>
<p>(1.6) Cost perspective: Expenses are (taxpayer) money / Time is money</p>	<p>Public clients focus on minimizing expenses (such as taxi rides and food) that could reach the media. However, public clients have no trouble engaging in long and costly meetings. Private clients, by contrast, have the opposite mindset: total costs and hours are what matter.</p>	<p><i>"I feel that the public sector, compared to the private sector, is very scared about costs in the form of expenses. In the form of, a taxi ride is super-scary. But in the form of an afternoon meeting with 10 people, [the costs] are nothing. Whereas the private sector has a better understanding, I think, of costs overall"</i> (Henrik)</p> <p><i>"[Meetings with public clients] are usually very long. (...) And we're not allowed to take a taxi. (...) So we go there by subway. But then we charge for that time too, so it's not a very good deal for them, really"</i> (Rebecca)</p>

<p>(1.7) Project orientation: Process / Action</p>	<p>Public clients focus on following correct protocol (e.g. procurement processes) and basing action in rational, information-backed, bureaucratic processes. Private clients, on the other hand, focus on progress and making things happen rather than the justifiability of their actions.</p>	<p><i>“[In political organizations] it matters a lot who comes up with an idea. In the private sector (...) a good idea is a good idea, no matter where it comes from” (Linus)</i></p> <p><i>“Public clients are more keen on strategy deliverables than the private sector. They are more likely to buy analyses, insights, strategies, while... usually, the private sector is more about the end deliverable. But... again, the final product might very well be the same” (Moa)</i></p>
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