



# Theorising the client–consultant relationship from the perspective of social-systems theory

David Seidl and Michael Mohe

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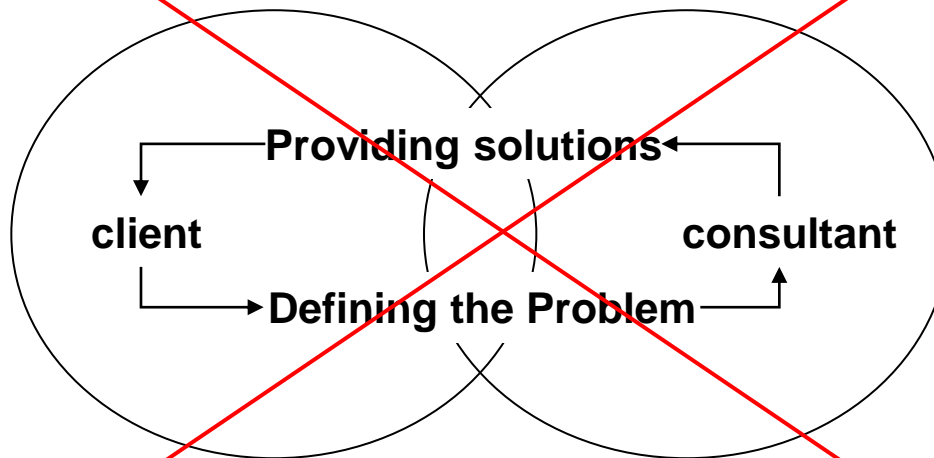


1. Social systems (e.g. organizations, families) are constituted of communications.
2. The meaning of communications is determined by the particular communicative context (i.e. by the specific social system).
3. Communications cannot be transferred from one context (system) to another (system): in a different system the “same” communication would be a different one.
4. Communications from outside a particular communicative system can only cause **perturbations** in the system.
5. Human beings have no control over their communications. It is the network of communications that determine what communications are realized (i.e. what difference a communication makes to further communications)

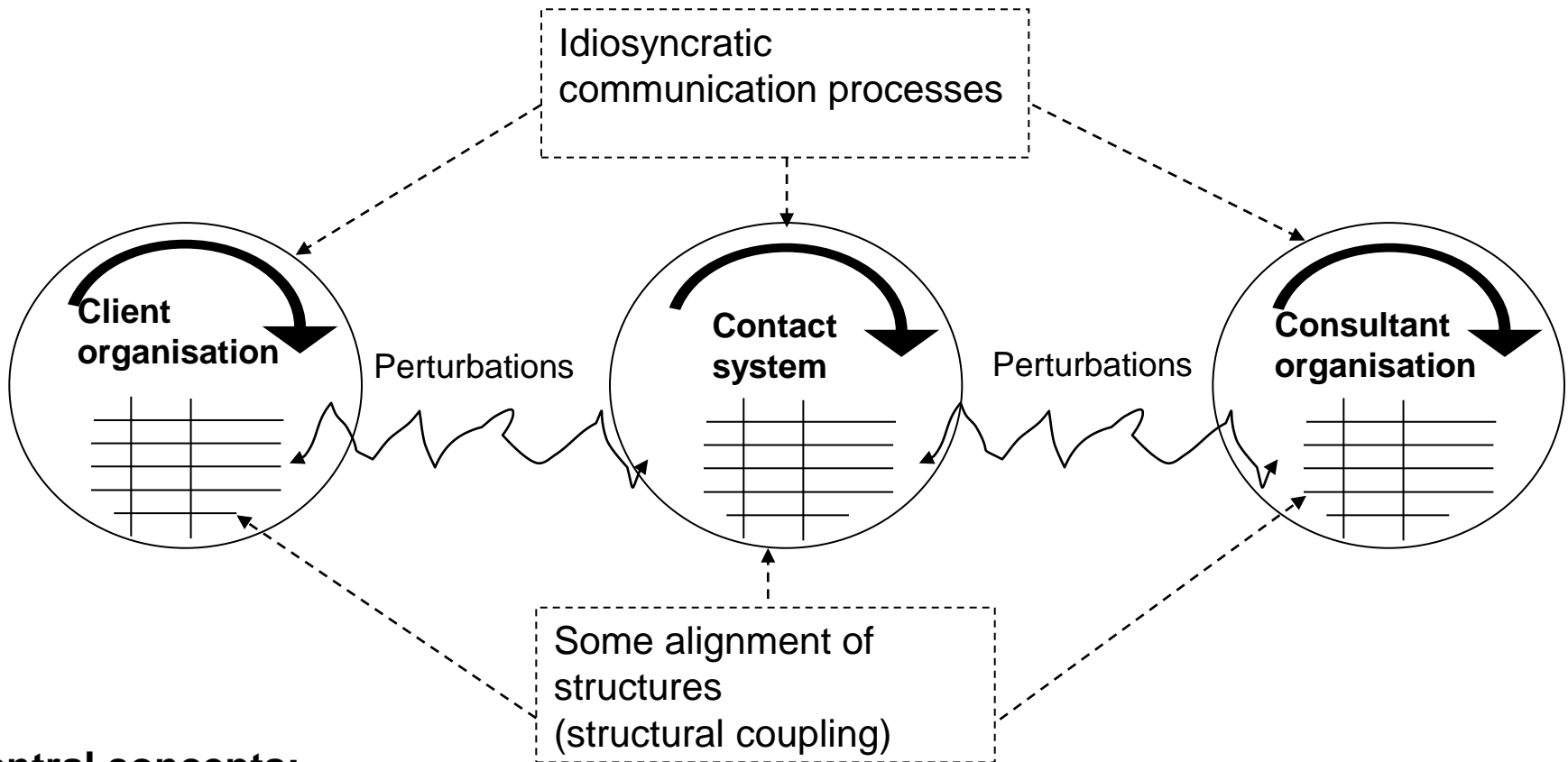
# Consequences for Conceptualizing Consulting

- ▶ Direct communication across different systems is impossible  
→ Communication barriers (Luhmann 2005; Kieser 2002)
- No direct communication between consulting firm and client company
- No overlap between the consultant and the client system

**Traditional conceptualization:**



# Consulting interactions as relation of three communication systems



## Central concepts:

- Self-referential communication
- Structural coupling
- Perturbation instead of input
- Contact system



# Implications

1. Acknowledgement of the existence of **three separate systems**
2. Acknowledgement of the difference between the systems as **constitutive** for the consulting intervention
3. Awareness of (one's own) **boundaries of communication**
4. Acknowledgement of the limited influence on the client: **Merely perturbation of the client system**
5. Acknowledgement of the **autonomy of the client** – any effects are the client's own product

## **Transferability to other forms of interorganizational relations:**

- Organizational networks (e.g. alliances, joint ventures)
- Company-supplier relations
- Etc.



Thank you



# Backup

# Luhmann's Systems Perspective on Organization



## Niklas Luhmann: Organizations as social systems

- Social systems as self-reproducing systems of communication (Luhmann 1995)
- Different systems develop different logics of communication; the communication process becomes idiosyncratic (Luhmann 1989)

## BUT

- Social systems are **interactionally open**, i.e. they react to external events
- Yet, they always react according to their own logic