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# Migration Consultants and Knowledge Production

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Cultural Challenges

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## Introduction

Boswell's book *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge* (2009), provides important insights as to how knowledge is used in the migration-policy-community. A crucial advancement of her work is the definition of three roles that knowledge has for the creation of both narrative and practice of policy: legitimization, substantiating and instrumentalization. Based on this premise, this paper argues that these functions not only apply to knowledge as a product or outcome of the policy community. But they are also part of a system of knowledge labor that strategically places highly mobile and position-less workers, such as consultants, at the core of knowledge production.

Through the lens of consultancy, a temporary expert or adviser navigates the roles of political construction of this knowledge. As a result, the mechanism, the body behind the knowledge, is also instrumentalizing, legitimizing and sustaining policy orientations, narrative constructions and of course setting up recommendations for shaping the practice of organizations.

Considering this premise, this paper explores how consultants become particularly instrumental to epistemic practices within international organizations. Although legitimacy and sustaining power can also be observed in the hiring and in the use of consultants' expertise, this paper focuses particularly on the instrumental function they have within a wider system of knowledge production. This intentional focus is such, since this system aforementioned is not only in charge of sustaining a model of knowledge-making but in producing "expert"-workers that serve a particular business and production model. As a result, this paper zooms into three areas in which the consultants, as knowledge workers, become instrumental: the financial area, the political area and epistemic maintenance.

First of all, it is important to define consultants in this paper. Traditionally, consultants have been considered temporary expert advisers. However, the meaning of expertise, temporality and the advising role have gone through specific transformations since the first management consultants appeared at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, no longer it is needed to have an advising role to be a consultant, nor it is needed that their interventions are short-term, or that they are called "consultants". Nowadays, consultants can have roles that are permanent to their institutions, in a form of "non-affiliation" in which for many years they work for the same organization renovating their short term contracts. Also there are consultants that carry out research tasks but do not intervene in the negotiations or in direct advising. Furthermore, now new temporary categories have become more relevant in knowledge systems. Interns or individual contractors for example now also execute similar tasks as consultants.

In this context of a complex, converging and often unclear map of actors involved in the system of knowledge production, this paper starts with the premise that in fact clarity might not be as functional. In fact, this complexity is part of the process that becomes instrumental to the production of knowledge. When actors have less clear roles, and can navigate freely in the “in-between” of many interests and perspectives it grants a particular positionality to work with. Consultants in this sense are the perfect example having a unique position within this system, as they are independent workers, with no affiliation to the organizations but at the same time with terms of reference established for them. Therefore, instead of defining consultants through their contractual form, though temporality or their specific role, understanding them through their highly mobile positionality is an initial base for this paper.

Conversely, for the purpose and limitations of this contribution, the testimonies used for this paper are from -who I call- research consultants (RC) and knowledge maintenance tasks consultants (KMTC). Research consultants refer to those temporary workers that have concrete research tasks, such as data collecting, collating, analysis and recommendation proposals. KMT consultants, who could also be called “staff”-consultants, are those that are building permanent in-house knowledge, fulfilling tasks that are permanent to the organizations. Such roles involve for example: internal/program-based monitoring and evaluation tasks, donor reporting, etc.

Equally important is to expand on the context of space within which these consultants navigate this knowledge system. It has been mentioned that the consultants in this research project, and particularly in this paper, belong to International Organizations. However, it is also crucial to explore what and how IOs operate, especially when they use consultants. Often IOs working in migration research in factual terms are not hiring consultants directly. IOs often use third-party contractors or consultancy firms that are actually the direct employer. This means that IOs are often not involved in the consultant recruitment. These other third-party actors, that also survive and get purpose as organizations are active participants in the system of knowledge production.

Global governance, was a term coined by Zürn (2018) in *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy, and Contestation* refereeing to the interconnectedness of organizations in the field of international relations. This can be a useful lens to look at IOs since their scope of action and material presence through the bodies and work of consultants expands to the global level. As such, a more useful term is “global organizations”, since they contain several affiliations and interests, and show a deep interconnection and symbiotic practice that forms a community of knowledge production. Here, coming back to Boswell as she references expert knowledge as specifically connected to the policy community, can be further expanded and challenged by the presence of consultants. Even though policy development has been

seen as a focus of organizations, consultants have been there to secure not only policy, but also organizations.

In brief the guiding questions of this paper is how consultants become instrumental to organizations and if there are any alternatives to consulting in the process of knowledge creation? The answer to these questions will be guided by the narrative accounts of consultants of global organizations occupying various roles within the field of migration knowledge creation, Finally, the ultimate goal of this paper is to grant visibility to the hidden actors that are crucial to the process of knowledge creation.

## Instrumentalization Theory

Instrumentalization theory is based on the Weberian notion of functional rationality (Funk, 2019). One of the main assumptions of Weber's instrumental rationality is that "the sum of preferences and actions of individuals translate into organizational action in a relatively straight forward way." (Boswell, 2009). Seeing from this strict lens the process of consultancy is definitely short-sighted and unrealistic to the complex dynamics between consultants, the organizations they work for, and the knowledge work they do. As a result, it is crucial to aim not only to an expansion of this concept but also to ascribe new possible meanings to it. Particularly in the study of consultants, there is a need to highlight the complex relationships that have specific functions and that nor can only be framed solely to the organizations' objectives neither to the consultant's agencies alone.

The use of "instrumentality" in this paper therefore refers to these complex and situated relationships that consultants sustain in order to create and support knowledge products and practices. In this sense, it sees that consultants do have particular functions that tightly relate to the needs and epistemic practices of knowledge production inside organizations. As such, it correlates to the understanding that "the multiple functions of knowledge pull in different directions, creating contradiction and a continual flux of institutional arrangements put in place for delivering this knowledge. Given the rather messy state of affairs, it is not surprising that a whole industry has emerged to promote "good practice" in knowledge transfer." (Boswell, 2015).

Based on this premise, instrumental use of consultants and the knowledge they produce is far greater than organization and system order and survival. It is also a resource as other authors have affirmed, that grants deep forms of symbolic and material power as well that is also navigated with many tools of agency and resistance (Kipping and Clark, 2012). This paper deals with three forms of instrumental use of consultants in this complex web of relationships inside global organizations: financial,

political and paradigm maintenance. Through these different forms of positionalities, it hopes to explain the greater question of this paper of why we need consultants?

## Financial Instrumentalization

The qualities, convergences and differences of expert knowledge versus academic knowledge was a central question to the research project which this paper is based on. There is a general agreement among the interviewees that what they produce is not academic knowledge or academic research, despite the fact that some methodological and theoretical basis could be shared. Some of the interviewed consultants did not even call it *expert knowledge*, but in fact “practical knowledge/research”, or “evidence-based research” (*Interviews Bonilla Lara, 2020*).

From a political economy perspective, it could be said that what research consultants do is a form of *command research*. This is because one of the central aspects of research, such as the systematic investigation of something founded in scholastic academia, is academic independence. Independence means that the researchers are not only allowed to write the evidence they find but that they have the freedom to ask critical questions, the freedom to be curious. Research consultants from the start are not encouraged in this process. Through well and deeply explanatory terms of reference consultants research mostly what is needed from them. Boswell in this sense proves how in two different immigration offices knowledge is oriented to the policy trend that both politicians and bureaucracies push (Boswell, 2009). The case of consultants in global organizations makes this tendency even more palpable.

Under the clear guidance of deliverables and products, even the language of knowledge creation within consultancy work makes consultants service providers and their hiring organizations their clients. This is how one of the interviewed consultants sees this relationship:

*“When you work for a client [...] you know that at the end of the day, you’re providing a service for them. So they have to sign off on it. And [...] they put these disclaimers at the beginning saying, “Oh, this report does not reflect the views of the organization. And they only reflect the views of the author.” You know that organizations want to make sure that what is in the report reflects what they think and it is in line with all their policies and messaging.”*  
(Consultant, 2020)

In this sense, it could be argued that consultants are part of a neoliberal model of production of knowledge, in which not only the centrality is policy development but which is built on a business structure. First of all, consultancy contracts are the way in which organizations outsource knowledge processes which for many reasons cannot

be produced in-house. Some examples of these reasons are: first, that organizations do not have financial resources or are not interested in building permanent research units. This has to do with several factors, that include the model of growth and expansion of organizations in a “globalized” world. A clear example of this is International Organization of Migration (IOM), which since its creation in the 1950s (IOM, 2022) went from being an organizations of travel logistics between Europe and the US to work in what they called “migration management” and now operates in more than 100 countries (IOM, 2022). This expansion of the organization both in physical range of action as well as tasks could be a reason why this organization in particular outsources most of their knowledge production tasks to consultants.

A second reason has to do with the historical hierarchical disparity that existed within global organizations. Although organizations cannot be compared in general, even those belonging to the so-called humanitarian sector, are known both by their high salary and security that their workers are offered, once they arrive to hold a fixed staff position. However, these structures are creating inequalities as the salary-scale tops up even well-paid jobs in the countries they operate. Where staff positions are so seldom, enormous competition and salary bridges appear. This is the experience of another consultant that entered consulting after a long process inside these structures:

*“I found it really, really discouraging. And so, you know, smart, really motivated, driven people [...] get driven out or get discouraged from staying in the UN. I mean, that’s not just about the HR processes. There are lots of different aspects that kind of build all of that up. And the consequence is like the UN is quiet an old organization, the average age is 45. Because people go in, they get permanent positions and they sit on them.”*

*(Consultant, 2020)*

Based on this structure, “independent workers” such as consultants are the most adaptable players. Although often, especially research consultants earn more, in factual terms financial gain is not the only factor that has to be counted in: Social security, vacation, maternity leave, pension are all worker rights that in most cases consultants have to cover on their own. This creates what Linda Muller calls privileged precarities. Despite of working on highly prestigious organizations and projects, consultants become the precarized, highly replaceable labor. Through this precarity and unequal treatment that is evident even in the access to buildings or general internal work opportunities, consultants hold the enormous weight of providing results under uncertain circumstances. (Müllli, 2021)

Considering the aforementioned, consultants become instrumental in the business model that on the side appraises independency and mobility and on the other side hides the inequalities within organizations. Finally, the question here lies as to how this precarity connects to knowledge creation, and as illustrated before, if one

considers academic independence a key factor of expert knowledge, then the conditions of work of consultants evidences a deep dependency on the hiring organizations. Of course, this precarity is not the case for all consultants, since some of them manage to deeply negotiate their own terms of reference or they have other work alternatives, or they belong to a country with a solid social system. However, especially for consultants in the Global South or coming from the Global South this was a generalized experience.

## Political Instrumentalization

Policy-making is a process of negotiation of different actors and interest. Consultants navigate this “community” like Boswell calls it (2009), in a rather fluid way. Consultants could work physically inside government offices while having a contract for an IO or a consultancy firm. Although this outsourcing corresponds to the model mentioned above, and it is not an uncommon practice, this lack of organizational affiliation could be further explored.

Why is this lack of affiliation problematic? The answer could be discussed in different aspects. The first is the realm of the organization. Antoine Pécoud (2015) has exposed the way in which IOs use experts for the constructions of certain narratives, narratives of sustanation, as Boswell would call them, in order to sustain the vision and direction of both the organization and their network. He calls these International Migration Narratives, as the way in which organization simplify something complex into narratives that want to appear “neutral”, “apolitical” and that become widely used in an effort to generate a constant reiteration of concepts (Pécoud, 2015). This is how this process works in practice:

*“So, what you will see is that international organizations will very much integrate those themes and those catchphrase into their project documents. Because for example, somebody sitting in the European commission is going to approve or fund that project. [They] want to see those catchphrases because those catchphrases are currently being cited in their own policy documents. So there’s that trend [of] “Okay, we’ve got to have a bit of the SDGs and we’ve got to have a bit of counter trafficking and we’ve got to have a bit of the Paris Climate Change.” [...] But then, the reality on the ground could be quite different in terms of the extent to which these concepts are understood, or actually being integrated into activities. [...] That is also a problem often, is this kind of top down project development, you know, what’s hot at the moment is migration and gender.” (Consultant, 2020)*

As this shows, narratives become repetitive strokes of the same note. In this sense, demonstrating the importance of certain notions or areas of knowledge that even

though might seem just the new focus of organizations, their repetition is far from an apolitical action. Considering this epistemic contradiction, consultants also become the actors who embody this disconnection to the very real political engagement of organizations. Far from being workers with neutral agendas or being independent advisers consultants navigate these structures and interests almost in an invisible manner:

*“Some people understand that [eventually, maybe by working as a consultant this could mean other job opportunities for them within the UN] and do pursue it in that way, there are some individuals who don’t really understand the distinction between who we are and what we do. At the UN there can be that blurring of the lines, because as you mentioned, these are the people who are going into the field. They’re wearing the IOM vest because they’re doing work for IOM. But they’re not on an IOM contract in that. I mean, actually it happens across the world, basically those who are delivering aid on the ground, even if they’re wearing a WFP jacket or a UNHCR jacket typically will not be on a contract from those entities. They will be a local implementing partner from an NGO or a third-party contractor, something like that.”*  
(Consultant,2020)

This testimony illustrates, the consequence of this lack of affiliation. The first one being a problem of accountability. If a community is researched by a person that comes with a vest of an organization, do its members know that this person might work also with the government in their programing? Do they know that maybe a private company has provided the contract? And who do they go to revise what is written about them, to claim anything?

Reports made by consultants as in the testimony aforementioned, often have a disclaimer that the organization is not responsible for the views exposed. However, if the consultant is also not affiliated with the organization, therefore who can be held responsible? The publisher, the editors?

These questions that could appear in any critical forum of accountability demonstrate the tension of the interventions done by organizations/goverments/private companies embodied by consultants. The main point for this paper is to establish the current environment of political strategy in the use of consultants, and that is to depoliticize not only the outcome but even the knowledge producers.

## Paradigm Maintenance

In 2006, Robin Broad wrote a piece titled “Research, knowledge, and the art of ‘paradigm maintenance’: The World Bank’s Development Economics Vice-Presidency



(DEC)" that explores the political economy of research inside the World Bank. Through a deep investigation Broad demonstrates the mechanisms in which, "paradigm maintenance" (borrowing the term of Robert Wade) is achieved. Practices such as "incentives in hiring, promotion and publishing, as well as a selective enforcement of rules, discouragement of dissonant data and actual manipulation of data" (ibid, 2006) are here common to the process of knowledge creation.

Consultants in the field of migration are part of similar practices. The central role of this practices is to maintain first of all, a particular narrative that generally goes in accordance to the policy community interests. The aforementioned International Migration Narratives as called by Pécoud, and their simplification and depoliticization practices could also be seen as both manipulation and use of data to correspond organizational aims. For instance, this is a consultant working for a project on reporting of migrant deaths says:

*"It was like, oh my goodness, the reporting, our numbers like they're using [them], they're sourcing us. That means that we're a credible source. And then it started to be like, oh, now they're using our figures to show that the EU Turkey deal is like a good thing..." (Interview Consultant, 2020)*

As this example illustrates, regardless if a consultant might have a different political positioning from the organization, even the way that data is built, collated and analyzed can produce a variety of "undesired" outcomes.

This leads to the second form of practice that sustains the process of paradigm maintenance, that is epistemic practices. Epistemic practices have been conceptualized in simple terms as those actions that make things known (Bueger, 2015). Of course the narrative constructions are epistemic practices, but before narratives there are also common practices that in the context of Global Organizations working on migration have deep impact on how the subject is theorized, implemented and politically managed. A core argument of this paper is that consultancy or temporary expert hiring is part of those practices. Indeed, the way that consultants are hired, associated in very loose ways to the organizations that participate in their terms of reference and their mobility are all part of practices of making migration known in a certain way. As McDonald also unravels in his novel is that management consulting, in a way is one of the greatest tools to avoid accountability and transparency both for governments and organizations. Namely, the hiring institution is able to argue that their actions were guided by experts and consultants swore to the terms of their contracts cannot reveal what and how this advice occurred. (ibid, 2013)

In the context of migration, this process show that paradigms are sustained not only by the use of information in the interest of organizations, but by the practices in which knowledge is constructed and embedded. Paradigm maintenance in this sense,

transforms also into an objective of knowledge production that in the case of migration shows the slow almost immobile phase in which policy in this field evolves. Thus, consultants are needed to keep the system of accountability loose and knowledge production flowing.

## Conclusion

The main argument of this paper was to reveal the way that consultants become instrumental to the system of knowledge production. As such consultants are needed in three main aspects: financial, political and that one of paradigm maintenance. Consultant's positionality as highly mobile yet dependent and precarized workers has a central role in the way that knowledge is generated. Furthermore, this dynamic opens up the question of what it means to do research under these circumstances and what does this say about both the quality and potential of innovation that the knowledge generated by these experts has.

The answer to this question can vary, and it demonstrates great potential that indeed opens up a gray zone of practice, a zone of conflictive and contradictory ideas and positions. Indeed, it is in the complexity of these new dynamics of work and production that also complex answers can be delivered. In that spirit, this paper responds to an initial aim, to visibilize these new actors that are part of these complex dynamic and most importantly, to show the need of revising consulting as a practice. The sociology of complexity, a new trend in the social sciences, pushes to the revision, reframing and rewriting of these models that although becoming well-established practices in society, are necessary to realistically adaptation to the current societies' dynamics. This appeal that resonates, with Boswell final claim in the book that has inspire this paper, she says: "it is time to develop more sophisticated accounts of the multiple and often contradictory uses of knowledge. We need to understand knowledge use not just as a means of adjusting to policy [...]" (Boswell, 2009). In this way, the study of of knowledge workers such as consultants proposes new pathways of complexity that hopefully motivate to look beyond the current practice and epistemic paradigms of knowledge creation.

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