

# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PRIVATE HOMEBUILDERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

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Owner-built housing projects are the most common construction projects undertaken in Ghana. A notable feature of the projects is the limited engagement of professional services of construction professionals. Previous studies indicate a negative attitude of clients toward consultancy services on such projects, with the consequent impact on project performance. Even on the same project, clients and consultants view issues in different ways. Thus to get a fuller understanding of clients' attitudes, they have to be observed through their own eyes. This paper explores the phenomenon of low utilisation of otherwise extensively available highly trained professionals, from the client's viewpoint. Previous studies have identified certain negative preconceptions of clients, among a broad range of causes, for their unwillingness to engage professionals on private housing projects, but do not explore the bases for the perceptions of clients. This study develops an in-depth description of homebuilder clients' perceptions on the employment of professional services, and what feeds those perceptions. The study adopts a phenomenological approach, using in-depth interviews and constructivist abstraction to define clients' perceptions on professional services in homebuilding. The portraits of four clients' experiences are synthesised into a composite description of their perceptions and consequent effects on their relationship with consultants. The results revealed clients to perceive consultants' services as inaccessible, inconvenient, expensive and as a second resort. The factors that have led to these perceptions include client prejudice, social conditions, construction industry conditions, consultants' actions and clients' experience of living in the houses they build. Clients' perceptions lead them to mostly engage non-professionals. The findings should enable consultants to have a better understanding of homebuilder clients.

Keywords: client, Ghana, perceptions, relationships.

## INTRODUCTION

Many clients are known to consistently deny consultants a free hand to operate (Alinaitwe 2008). They lack basic understanding of professional practices (Boyd and Chinyio 2006), are inconsistent in their payments, and have the habit of executing projects in bits over a very long period of time (Alinaitwe 2008). The awareness of these problems and the need for dealing with it has been highlighted by some past studies (Alinaitwe 2008; Siva and London 2012). However, many of the studies have focused on contractors' and consultants' viewpoints (ref). and on large commercial developers and corporate bodies (Vennström 2008; Nuamani and Tsegay 2011).

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Nevertheless, many key questions still remain unanswered or partially investigated. For instance how do private homebuilding clients perceive the relevance of professional services? What factors have influenced clients' perceptions? How have professionals contributed to client perceptions? The fundamental proposition of this research is that clients' attitudes toward the engagement of consultants on homebuilding projects are largely due to their perceptions on the need for construction consultancy services.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to develop a composite description of homebuilders' perceptions on the relevance of the services of construction consultants. Such studies are consistent with strategies of inquiry such as case study, ethnography, phenomenological studies, and grounded theory. The phenomenological research method was adopted as it generally deals with people's perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and emotions associated with everyday life, thereby offering the prospect of authentic accounts of complex phenomena from the perspective of those actually involved (Denscombe, 2010, p 93). Non-probability (purposive) sampling was chosen because of its potential to yield the most relevant information (Hansemark and Albinsson 2004) for a phenomenological study like this. Each of the client units were expected to have unique characteristics and that themes and categories would emerge from comparing the different experiences. There were thus two units of analysis. The first one comprised clients who were in a position to build a house but had not yet done so and had never engaged the services of a consultant. The second unit comprised clients who had engaged the services of consultants on a house project. A total of 4 participants (see Table 1) were chosen for the study as Giorgi (2008a) recommends a minimum of three cases for such studies. In order to achieve "geographic diversity" (Nitta et al., 2010), respondents were drawn from two regions in Ghana with the highest number of private home building projects (Greater Accra and Ashanti Region).

*Table 1: Summary of client characteristics*

CLIENT	REGION	OCCUPATION	AGE (YRS)
UNIT ONE			
Ann	Ashanti	Banker	30 - 40
Kay	Greater Accra	Cement Retailer	20 - 30
UNIT TWO			
Joe and April	Greater Accra	Computer Engineer	30 – 40
		Clothes Seller	
Kate	Ashanti		20 -30

*Note:* Names are all pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Sixty to ninety minute recorded interviews were conducted with clients. Interview questions were open-ended to afford respondents the opportunity to express themselves freely with minimal influence from the interviewer. Specific guiding questions were also used to seek answers to pertinent questions that were not addressed during open-ended discussions (Yin 1994). The analysis of data adopted in

this research involved a "repeated reading" of transcripts and field notes (Morrissey and Higgs, 2006). Following the procedures recommended by Giorgi (1985; cited in Morrissey and Higgs, 2006), and Creswell (2006) key statements and words providing insight into clients perceptions were highlighted. These were then grouped into clusters and common themes were identified. A "textural and structural description" of clients' experiences and the factors influencing their perceptions were respectively produced based on the emergent themes. The final step involved producing a "composite description" of client perceptions based on the structural and textural descriptions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Themes of client perceptions

Five themes emerged (see Table 2): 1) competence and capabilities, 2) cost of engagement, 3) roles and responsibilities, 4) relationships, and 5) rules of engagement.

*Table2: Themes of client perceptions*

THEME	SUB-THEMES
Competence and capabilities	Performance, age, availability/accessibility, improvement, service/business quality
Cost of engagement	Fees, convenience, differentiation, standardisation
Roles and responsibilities	Need, expectation, scope, differentiation
Relationships	Learning, essence, communication, treatment, autonomy, age
Rules of engagement	Need, benefits, enforceability, appeal, effects

### *Competence and capabilities*

Homebuilders perceive consultants' competence and capabilities differently. Generally, consultants are perceived to possess the competence and capabilities outlined by the past studies (Boyd, 2011; Kurrer, 2008). However, homebuilders feel that local consultants are inaccessible, making their presence not being felt. They feel that consultants are responsible for their own inaccessibility and therefore think finding a consultant is a difficult task. As a consequence, homebuilders rate Ghanaian consultants' competence and capabilities to be just above average.

"...Well for now, I will give them 6 out of 10...It is a fifty-fifty situation." (Joe and April)

"...And sometimes we have the perception that we cannot always approach them..." (Ann)

Clients also perceive consultants to be poor businessmen. They feel that consultants are only interested in the technicalities of construction and not the business aspects of their engagement.

"...Consultants should be able to separate the business side of their work from the technicalities. They should be two different things..." (Joe and April)

### *Cost of engagement*

Clients perceive fees paid to engage consultants to be too high. Interestingly, such perceptions were shared by all the clients interviewed. Past studies on consultancy fees (Drew et al., 2002a) intimate that many clients put undue emphasis on fees paid to consultants during their selection process. The data analysis revealed this finding to be the same in the case of clients interviewed.

“...They should have sympathy on us... You charge us fat cash.” (Kate)

Clients feel that the best time for them to engage consultants is when they have money. This was revealed in the statements made by Joe and April:

“You look at your budget and because you don’t have money you are forced to go to the other side. But when the finances are good, you can get a professional...”

Drew et al., (2004) found that most clients in their selection of consultants look to obtain the highest quality of service at the lowest price possible. However, when it comes to professional services, there is a positive correlation between cost and quality (Drew et al., 2002a). Thus, in many cases, clients are torn between making a choice in favour for cost or quality. The fact that homebuilders find this situation to be inconvenient is revealed in Ann's statements:

“...the other people will charge cheaper and the surplus will be used for something else.”

### *Roles and responsibilities*

The roles and responsibilities of consultants in themselves are perceived by clients as key to the construction process. However consultants per se are not perceived as indispensable. This perception was recurrent in the statements made by all the respondents.

“Really necessary? Well, I was just thinking. I think it was necessary, but really necessary, no...” (Kate)

Clients perceive consultants to want to do all their work upfront. This perception cut across both groups of clients.

“The thing is, what will stop you from going to the consultant is that we don’t know that we can tell them that we want to do the house from this part and then move on that part... We think that the consultants would want to complete the work all at once,.. We want to do the work bit by bit. We don’t think you will be ready to do that.” (Kate)

### *Relationships*

All clients shared the perception that engaging a consultant was an avenue for “client learning” (Siva and London, 2012). In contrast to the findings of some previous studies on professional practice (Cuff, 1991), when it comes to the issue of ‘learning opportunities, clients do not perceive consultants as people who “just do” things. To clients, the best people to learn from are construction professionals.

“The architects however take their time to work for you... They don’t just build... They also teach you a lot of things. Anything they do, they will talk to you about it.” (Kay)

Generally, clients perceive a relationship with a consultant as the “best for their building”. To many clients, engaging a consultant on a project is a sign of prestige.

“At least, it adds some prestige to the project but that won’t be the main influence.”  
(Ann)

Previous studies on client-consultant relationships revealed clients to have negative perceptions on how consultants treat their clients (RIBA, 1992, 1993, and 1995). The results confirmed this.

“...we deserve a lot of respect from them.” (Kate)

Clients perceive that it would be difficult for them to maintain their autonomy when working with an older consultant. Clients' statements indicated that they would feel comfortable working with relatively younger consultants.

“I personally will like to deal with a younger person... If you insist, they (older consultants) see you to be disrespectful whereby in the real sense you were just insisting on your preference.” (Ann)

#### *Rules of engagement*

All clients, irrespective of their background, have the perception that although there are statutory regulations, they are not being enforced and as such it is “not compulsory” to seek professional help when building houses. Some clients perceive the non-enforceable nature of statutory regulations as the cause of poor quality construction works. Clients hold the perception that adopting formal rules of engagement would necessarily mean that consultants will demand higher fees and vice versa. This perhaps could explain the reason why some of them are apprehensive toward adopting formal rules of engagement on their projects.

“But I think signing a contract is good because it comes with seeing to it that the work gets done well. I am sure I will be charged extra for that.” (Kate)

#### **Factors influencing clients' perceptions**

Five factors that influence clients' perceptions were identified. In addition to revealing the factors the findings also confirm the fact that clients' perceptions are not totally under the direct influence of consultants (Mahon and Watrick, 2003). This study has not only confirmed the findings of past studies but has also revealed specific characteristics about clients that account for the subjectiveness of their self-generated perceptions. Majority of the clients indicated that they have very little knowledge and understanding of the technicalities involved in construction.

#### *Client prejudice*

Some perceptions that clients hold of consultants are self-generated. For instance, asked about how they get to know that it is expensive to seek professional services, Kate replied:

“Uhm, I just guessed...Consultants go to school; they acquire degrees, so obviously their services are going to be expensive. I needn't ask anybody”

Formal and education curriculum at the basic level interestingly falls short when it comes to the issue of shelter. For this reason, many people, apart from those with specialized training in construction, demonstrate a lack of knowledge of the proper processes required to provide shelter for themselves. This was confirmed by analysis. Among clients who had been to school, apart from those who had taken practical steps to know more about construction, the closest the rest had come to design and construction was pre-technical skills and drawing they studied in Junior High School.

### *Social factors*

Social factors account for the perceptions that clients hold of the construction industry and its workforce. Some past studies confirm this finding. According to Vaid (1999; cited in ILO, 2001), many people including construction workers do not want their children to work in the construction industry; “they wish for better things for their children”. Thus, to many people, the construction industry is not presented in an appealing way.

“...And at the basic level, the construction industry is not presented in a palatable way.” (Ann)

Clients' perceptions are also borrowed from those they have social ties with. This was evident in the stories of all clients interviewed.

“I had a friend who wanted to build and that is how he went about the whole thing. He is the one who told me that it is expensive to engage a consultant.” (Ann)

### *Construction industry conditions*

The global construction industry is characterized by the collapse of buildings, poorly constructed building, widespread corruption, political interference, and unqualified workforce undertaking shoddy works (ILO 2001). Nevertheless, the construction industry also has to some extent a positive image. Internationally and locally, all of these conditions affect clients' perceptions of the industry. The results of the analysis confirm this fact. It is evident that where the industry conditions are good, clients tend to have a positive perception and vice versa.

“Something that affected me very much was the collapse of the Melcom building...I realized that it was a very critical thing. You can't just entrust your life into anyone's hands.” (Ann)

In both developed and developing countries a greater percentage of the labour force in construction is made up of those with little or no education (ILO 2001). These are the people that the relatively few highly skilled and educated consultants compete with.

“The fact that consultants are good does not mean that the others are not good...Others also use laypeople and their houses are nice. It is a matter of finding the right laypeople to do the work.” (Ann)

### *The consultant*

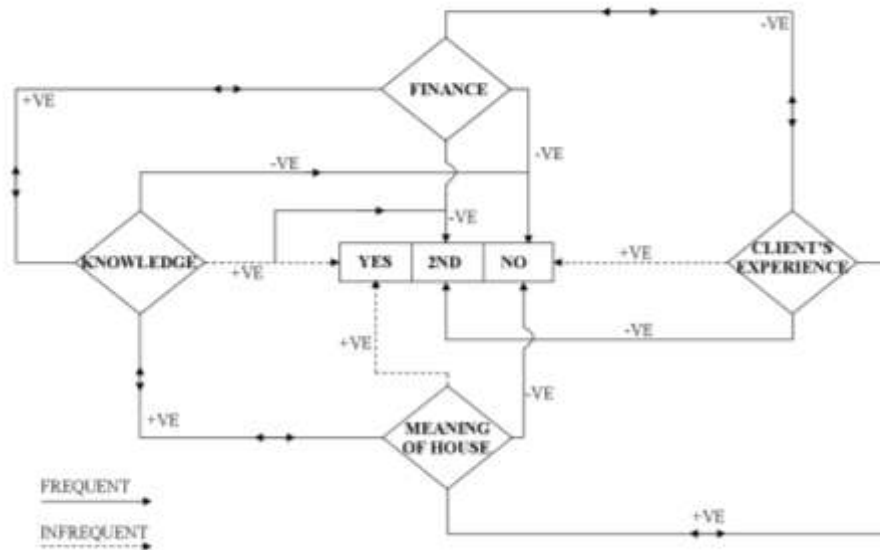
The actions of the consultant during the project relationship also account for the perceptions of clients. They can either reinforce clients' existing perceptions or change them. By working in a systematic manner to help clients understand the nature of professional work (RIBA 1992; Crafford 1997) consultants can change clients' negative perceptions. The findings in this study confirm this fact.

“Yes. We didn't have money to finish all the work in a year or six months. But now I know that it's possible to get the consultant to do the work in stages even if I want to do it small. The consultant told me that.” (Kate)

### *The house*

“Looking at our house and the kind of problems we are having right now, if we used consultants, we would have gotten everything right...” (Kate)

Clients interviewed had developed perceptions through their contact with the house. Past studies on client learning found that through living in the house which was a product of a consultant's work or not, clients acquired a better appreciation of the



work done by consultants (Siva and London, 2012). This indicates that another avenue where consultants can influence the perceptions of their clients is the house.

### Effects of perceptions on clients' attitude toward engagement of consultants

The Perception Effect Model (see Figure 2) explains the existence of the phenomenon of low-utilization of consultants on house projects.

#### *The Yes*

The perceptions of some clients on the need to engage the services of consultants on house projects has resulted in their being more determined to engage consultants on their projects. This effect is the “Yes” on the Perception Effect Model.

*Figure 2: The perception effect model*

“They are not being imposed on us. This boils down to the individual’s opinion and what they want. In my own perspective, I think engaging consultants will be the best for me.” (Kay)

From the model, there are two direct routes to the “Yes”. First, clients had adequate knowledge of construction issues that made them generate positive perceptions about consultants. Second, some clients had either come into contact with a house that had caused them to generate positive perceptions of consultants or the house they wanted to have a house meant a lot to them (the dream house) that it had led them to develop positive perceptions of the need for consultants. The model also reveals an indirect route to the “Yes”. A positive financial standing alone was not enough to lead a client to the “Yes”. It had to be combined with a positive perception of consultants that had been fuelled by the client’s adequate knowledge on construction issues.

#### *The No*

The perceptions of some clients on the need to engage the services of consultants on house projects had led them to see the engagement of a consultant on their house project as unnecessary. This is the “No” on the Perception Effect Model.

“...Unfortunately at that time, we did not have an overbloated budget to spend the building. Whatever we would have paid the consultant could have comfortably been used to do other things...” (Joe and April)

There are three direct routes to the “No”. First, clients perceived consultants not to be “the only good people to” help them on house projects. This gives the indication that if a client has a positive experience dealing with non-professionals, they would make an outright decision not to engage consultants. Second, the house that these clients wanted to build did not mean anything to them. They felt that it was “just a house” and so this engaging a consultant on such a project was a “waste of time and money”. Third, the clients perceived engaging a consultant to be expensive and so since their financial standing was negative, they could not see themselves engaging a consultant. There is one indirect route to the “No”. When clients’ financial standing was positive, it had to be combined with a perception of consultants that had been fuelled by the client’s knowledge on issues pertaining to construction. In this instance, clients who did not have adequate knowledge of issues pertaining to construction and consultancy services, even though they were “rich” headed for the “No”. This might explain why among clients who do not engage consultants on their project are people who are in a position to afford the cost of engaging consultants. The clients who fell into this category were influenced by at least one of these factors.

#### *The second resort*

Some clients see the engagement of a consultant on their house project as second resort if they undergo a change in circumstance or their initial decision not to engage consultants becomes unsuccessful.

“Yes, we were very angry... We know that now so maybe if we are building a new house we will fully engage a consultant right from the start... Never again will I use the local people.” (Kate)

There are two direct routes to the “2nd”. First, all clients had been through negative experiences working with non-professionals. Second, the clients perceived engaging a consultant to be expensive and so since their financial standing was negative, they could not see themselves engaging a consultant. However, two indirect routes were also identified. The first indirect route to the “2nd” indicated that when the clients’ financial standing changed from negative to positive, clients who had developed positive perceptions due to their adequate knowledge of issues pertaining to construction and consultancy services headed for the “2nd”. Alternatively, clients whose financial standing remained negative chose consultants as a second resort when their perceptions were positively affected by the knowledge they had acquired. This might explain why among clients who engage consultants on their projects are people who are not in a position to afford the cost of engaging consultants.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The research involved determining the extent to which clients’ clients’ perceptions affected their attitude toward engaging consultants on house projects. Four in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with homebuilding clients. The data collected from the interviews was analyzed by using the phenomenological research approach. This study has built on existing research to refine the understanding of the consultant-client relationship on house projects by exploring in much detail client perceptions and how it impacts on client-consultant relationships on house projects. The five key themes of clients’ perceptions that were derived are Competence and Capabilities, Cost of Engagement, Roles and Responsibilities, Relationships, and Rules of Engagement. This study has also revealed five factors that influence clients’ perceptions; client prejudice, social factors, construction industry conditions, the consultant, and the house. The study identified the actions of the consultant as well as



the house that has been built as a product of the consultants work as the two main means through which consultants can help clients to develop positive perceptions about the need for engaging professionals on house projects. This study focused only on the client-consultant engagement on single a single house project as well as on the homebuilding (owner-occupier) client. The models developed from this study can be applied to the investigation of the client-consultant engagement on other project types as they are also common and offer a variety of circumstances and challenges to client-consultant relationships.

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