

**Living by projects:
A gender perspective on international project management**

by

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LIVING BY PROJECTS: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON INTERNATIONAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Abstract

As a form of work, the project is becoming increasingly common. One might say that work life has been “projectified”, but we still miss empirical studies on how project workers live their lives (as compared to the abundance of experiences in industrial HRM). This paper aims at analysing the project as a work form from a gender perspective, where project management theory and existing empirical accounts of project work are analysed with reference to how they contribute to the reproduction and production of gender structures.

From this analysis, we conclude that project management theory rests upon traditional male norms, and that its normative strength contributes to its reproduction in practice. In parallel to these exist also traditional female norms in practical project work, however, which implies that project management theory has not been able to comprise all important aspects of how individuals experience work in the projectified work life. This so called “human practice” must be studied in a different way; instead of studying single projects we need to study single individuals, their life forms and how they change over time.

Key words

Project management, project work, individual perspective, work form, life form, gender perspective, case studies, narrative approach

1. PROJECTS AS A WORK FORM AND LIFE FORM: CONSEQUENCES FOR INDIVIDUALS

1.1 From bureaucratic structures to project-based work

Since the mid-60's, the organisational principle of bureaucracy has been heavily criticised by researchers, management consultants and managers. The reason for this seemingly never-ending critique is the constant re-creation of bureaucracy; there seems to be an inherent tendency of organisations to handle growth and change by means of rule systems and hierarchies. When organisational theorists Burns & Stalker (1961) introduced the concepts "mechanistic" and "organic" as metaphoric descriptions of different structural forms of organisation, it was because they thought that organisations should choose structural form depending on in what environment they operated. Today, these concepts are instead used in order to lead organisations from the mechanistic form in the direction of the organic. The organisational environments that implied the mechanistic form does not exist anymore; in the hyper-competition of the present global economy new, flexible and innovative forms of organising are required.

According to most international research, most industries and markets are too volatile and unpredictable to be able to support bureaucratic organisational forms. Instead, we need organisations that can react quickly to unforeseen problems and produce innovative solutions to any emergent demand. And in such organisations, we need flexible and innovative individuals at all places and at all levels, not only in top management. These individuals must have the authority and the support necessary for taking prompt action on their own, not least a managerial culture allowing for experiments, debate and mistakes. Consequently, most major organisation invest substantial amounts of money into competence development, training, etc for the people that are actually in daily contact with the customers. The organisational structures that are implemented aims at supporting them and their work with best practices, quality control systems and information technology.

In most organisations, these changes have implied decentralisation efforts and, in some cases, different forms of matrix structures where different structuring principles are mixed (The Asea Brown Boveri group is an example of this). Structures can thus be seen as an expression on notions of boundaries in and around organisations, boundaries that are rapidly becoming more and more blurred, complex and ever-changing. Different sorts of temporary workers implies that the organisation cannot be defined in terms of its employees, and traditional physical boundaries such as office houses and factory areas is becoming quite meaningless in a world of information technology, home-based work and an increased service content in most products (services are produced where the customer is, not necessarily where the producer has his office).

Given this development, organisational metaphors such as "the federal organisation", "the virtual organisation", and "the imaginary organisation" been suggested by different authors. Even though the empirical base of these suggestions is quite weak (Barley & Kunda, 1998), they can be said to be a clear indication of the new conditions of organising in a global business environment. Organisations are not any longer distinct entities with stable structures and identifiable boundaries, they are platforms for the continuous combination and re-combination of resources in ever-changing situations requiring creativity, innovation and speed. An established and widely used way of achieving such flexibility is project-based organising.

During recent decades, the project has been an increasingly common way of organising in industrial enterprises, service-producing companies and the public sector (Lundin & Midler, 1998, Ekstedt et al, 1999, Meredith & Mantel, 2000). This is a consequence of that many products and services has become so customized and complex that each delivery has to be organised separately, but also of the fact that all organisations must work with continuous development and change. With its roots in the defence and construction industries, the project has been seen as a rational and planned approach of handling these new situations (Engwall, 1995). Consequently, we now find projects in all sectors of society, used for both small and large tasks, its principles being employed in everything from contract-based production for customers to internal change and development projects. The basic reason for this appears to be that project management offers ways of handling unique and time-limited situations in a flexible and unbureaucratic manner. One might even say that project management is the solution of the problems of bureaucracy to which most modern organisations are exposed (Pinto, 1996; Scotto, 1998).

Within many industries and corporations around the world, the project has become the "normal" form of organising. We thus find project-based organisations not only in advertising agencies and consulting firms, but also in heavy industry, R&D, cultural life, societal development, etc. A common characteristic of these organisations is that most significant activities are carried out within projects and programs, and that the permanent organisational structure can be seen as administrative support to these projects and programs (cf Anell, 2000). Given this development, we can also say that work life has been "projectified", i.e. that substantial parts of individuals' professional lives are spend withing projects and other temporary, task-focused sequences of organising. Most large industrial corporations use projects in complex production processes, as do small,

advanced knowledge-intensive firms in IT, hi-tec, advertising and consulting. Moreover, the use of projects for internal purposes such as strategic change, quality improvement, re-organisation and systems implementation seem to be on the increase (cf Blomquist & Packendorff, 1998b; Ekstedt et al, 1999). To many individuals, work then becomes a portfolio of a number of different teams, tasks and deadlines, often with insufficient coordination.

As the project becomes an increasingly common way to work and to view work, it also becomes increasingly obvious that it is not always as rational and stimulating as intended. Even project-based organisations end up in conflicts and internal politics, and there are usually many problems between single projects and their contexts causing budget overruns and delays (Pinto, 1996). The project – in its clear-cut form – does not suit all the different operations in which it is used, and in some cases traditional project management methods cause more problems than they solve (cf Blomberg, 1998). The same can be said about the tendency of “projectification” of organisations, where managers are constantly handling conflicts between project managers and departmental managers and prioritising between different projects. Parts of societal development (such as culture, art, European Union grants, academic research etc) are also becoming increasingly projectified, which implies a risk that short-term performance becomes more important than the implementation of long-term strategies, and that many projects become islands of their own without meaningful relations to their environment in time and space (Lundin & Söderholm, 1998). There are thus obvious reasons for critical examination of project-based work in organisations and its consequences for the individuals involved.

1.2 Projects as a work form for individuals: Theoretical origins

Project management as a theoretical field can be said to be based on a conceptual agreement on what a ‘project’ actually is. According to this agreement, the project is a unique and complex undertaking subject to restrictive goal formulations in terms of time, cost and quality (cf Packendorff, 1995). By this definition, project work should be possible to separate from other forms of work, and it should also be possible to construct special methods for optimizing the performance of the project. The origins of project management theory can be traced back to U. S. defence industry in the 1950’s (Engwall, 1998), where the time factor was the most essential when new weapon systems had to be launched during the arms races of the cold war. By time, the project came to be a widespread form of work even in commercial enterprises, and then other success factors such as cost and quality had to be taken into account. Together, these three factors form the so called project performance triangle, which symbolises the insight that a realistic project goal must be a trade-off between time, cost and quality restrictions (cf Meredith & Mantel, 2000). Since the cost factor is often the most explicit restriction, the practice of project management is usually to balance between time and quality within the non-disputable framework of the project budget.

When project work and traditional departmental work are compared, projects are usually positively described as the opposite form of work; hard to manage, often controversial but efficient and innovative (cf Pinto, 1996: 25). In terms of organising, temporary organising such as projects are usually contrasted against ‘permanent organising,’ i.e. formal organisations (Packendorff, 1995, Ekstedt et al, 1999). The message of such comparisons is that project management is something difficult and different that can yield important change and increased effectiveness. Compared to his colleagues in the ordinary hierarchy, the project manager is an individual that dare to be controversial and test new ideas in his endeavour towards delivering unique results within the restrictions of time, cost and quality. This does not imply chaos within the project; one important qualification for becoming project manager is the ability to plan and control all activities and resources despite the inherent insecurity present in most project situations. The departmental manager, on the other hand, can always lean on established routines, predictability and hierarchical power when leading his repetitive activities. Since project managers usually have to use resources controlled by departmental managers a classic potential of conflict appears, where the project manager acts in the interest of the project goal and the departmental managers try to maintain repetitive efficiency in their routine-based structures.

Given that this (theoretical) description of departmental vs project work is accurate, an increase in the use of the project form of organising should imply significant changes in the work conditions of individuals. If traditional theories on work satisfaction are applied (cf Hackman & Oldham, 1980), one might identify both potential advantages and drawbacks of project work, but then these theories were constructed for the improvement of industrial work environments in the 1960’s and 70’s. From such a perspective, project work means specialisation on assigned tasks (this does not apply to project managers, however), being responsible for these tasks only, lack of feedback from customers etc; i.e. circumstances usually seen as not beneficial to work satisfaction. At the same time, almost all tasks in a project should be necessary and important, which in combination with the inherent management-by-goals philosophy of project management makes work useful and self-directed. In addition, there are some specific aspects of project work not present in the literature on industrial environments, such as an abundance of deadlines, frequent changes of social contexts and problems of loose coupling between projects and their environment

(Blomquist & Packendorff, 1998a; Reeser, 1969). One consequence of this is the development of separate Human Resource Management practices for project organisations (Fabi & Pettersen, 1992).

It is not only the work content that has been subject to “projectification”, but also the conditions for membership in organisations. An increasing part of the total work force have no long-term, full-time employment, but rather different forms of temporary assignments (Bellaagh, 1998; Handy, 1991; Isacson, 1991). In between, there is a growing number of individuals being self-employed or being rented out by companies like Olsten and Manpower. Moreover, many individuals see their careers as more important than the different positions they have from time to time (cf Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2000); each job becomes a project, and the main goal of each such project is to be promoted to an even better job in the end.

It is thus clear that the consequences of project work for individuals cannot be limited to how they perceive their situation at work. An individual constantly working with short-term assignments and deadlines in mind will have his private life affected in various ways, especially if his employment (and thereby his income) is related to single projects rather than to an enduring position. There are apparent similarities with traditional top managers, who are usually expected to work until success is achieved, no matter the time and effort needed, no matter the consequences for private life (cf Watson & Harris, 1999). At the same time, there are also differences such as work discontinuity, limited authority and the exclusive focus on short-term issues. Traditional industrial forms of organising influenced not only the individual’s situation at work, but also how he lived his entire life in society; repetitive mass production became not only a work form but also a life form. In the same vein, a projectified work life should also imply changes in the way individuals live their lives outside work. As an established work form, the project contributes to (and is influenced by) the social construction of new life forms in society, life forms that can be expected to be both similar to and different from the current ones.

1.3 Projects as a life form: A gender perspective

Changes in the ways people work imply – as we noticed above – changes in how people live their lives and relate to each other. These changes do not occur on the surface only (i.e. in the form of individuals changing their visible behaviour); new forms of working and living will also result in new institutional values and norms about what work should be about and what is good and bad at work and in life in general. The most obvious example of this is the transformation from agricultural to industrial society during the 19th century, which implied far-reaching consequences for how work were organised and how lives were lived. On the surface there were urbanisation and regulated work hours, but in this process we also find the source of many of the norms and values that came to characterise the modern western civilisation. Likewise, the societal change processes that we are taking part of today will also result in new norms and values. When critically examining new forms of organising it is thus of utmost importance for HRM researchers to analyse on what norms they are constructed, and in what ways they will affect peoples’ work and their lives.

There are several possible directions such an analysis of the construction of institutional norms and values can take. One such way is to use a neo-marxist class perspective (which in this case would imply questions on if project work enhances emancipation and hinders degradation of work), another to deconstruct the project phenomena in a post-modernist way, looking for hidden meanings and contradictions (cf Alvesson & Deetz, 1999). The perspective chosen here, the gender perspective, seems more natural in that it combines an analysis of institutional norms and values with the notion of life forms for individuals; different life forms are built upon norms on what different individuals should do, and there are obvious differences between what lives that are expected from men and women, respectively (Jakobsen & Karlsson, 1993, Calás & Smircich, 1999). Industrial society meant a far-reaching hierarchisation and specialisation in society, which also came to characterise human relations insofar that traditional male norms on the importance of formal position and merits influenced how people interacted with each other. From a gender perspective, industrial mass production can be seen as contributing to a gender order that manifested itself in the life forms of modern individuals. When new forms of organisation and work emerges (such as virtual corporations, distance work, projects) it is important to analyse in what way these will affect the life forms of individuals in tomorrow’s society (jfr Bellaagh, 1998).

In a work life characterised by temporary, goal-focused sequences in varying social contexts, one might expect that the hierarchisation and specialisation principles of the current gender order would be less reproduced than now. The question is then in what way projectification of work life affect the life forms of individuals, and how it contributes to changes in the gender order. While there are parts of project management thinking that could imply an increased importance of female norms (such as teamwork, absence of hierarchies etc.) there are also tendencies such as an increased variation in workload, short-sightedness and goal rationality (i.e. already established male ways of thinking and working, cf Wahl, 1997). These inherent contradictions of project management thinking can be explained by the fact that the project form of working is handled differently in different

industries and organisations, but also by the sometimes overly positive rhetorics on the benefit of projects – rhetorics not always based on practical experiences. In a study of social work, Mulinari (1996) maintains that projects are constructed as a male phenomena, aiming at establishing control over time and space and the rational planning for active change. The project is then the opposite of traditional “permanent” forms of organising, aiming at the taken-for-granted continuity of everyday life (i.e. a female way of thinking). As Billing (1997) points out, it is however important to remember that conceptions of what is male and female are not stable over time; they are every day subject to continuous reproduction or change by individuals in society. It is thus more interesting to study what life forms and conceptions of gender that projectification reproduces and changes, rather than aiming for static conclusions concerning if the project form of working is male or female by nature.

One important observation concerning life forms is that different individuals have different life forms, and that these differences are built into the basic organising principles of society (Jakobsen & Karlsson, 1993). Life forms in industrial society can thus be seen as mostly influenced by male norms of hierarchisation and specialisation (Hirdman, 1990), and when we successively enter a projectified society it is of course necessary to analyse if old life forms are conserved or if new life forms are constructed. From a gender perspective one might expect that the project as a life form rests upon other male norms than industrial life forms (but still few female ones), which means that the consequences of projectification is in need for critical analysis, both from a practical and theoretical standpoint.

It is most obvious that while the project has been subject to a lot of scientific inquiry from organisational and leadership perspectives (see overview in Packendorff, 1995), the individual’s perspective of project work has been almost totally ignored. The project has mostly been universally treated as a question of rational planning, which has meant that project management theory has become just as de-personalised as organisation theory once was. And in those rare occasions when individuals have been present in research, it has only been project managers (who, in fact, are only a minority of all the people that do project work). Moreover, most literature tends to report normative guidelines on how these project managers should behave, rather than giving accurate descriptions of their actual behaviour (see overview in Caldwell & Posner, 1998). Theories based on empirical descriptions (such as “garbage can decision-making” or the impact of organisational culture) should be at least as important to both researchers and practitioners as theories constructed by logical reasoning (such as planning methods and project accounting systems).

Given this discussion, the basic problem of this paper is how projects as a work form contribute to the ongoing construction of structural conditions for individual action inside and outside organisations. The aim of the paper is thus to analyse how projects as a work form is constructed in theory and practice from a gender perspective. From this analysis, we intend to identify important research issues for upcoming research on individuals and project work. The paper starts out with a gender analysis of a number of in-depth studies of project reality, made by researchers in the field. Then, a case study of an individual, a person living and working by projects. The paper ends with a discussion on project theory and practice in relation to how individuals live their lives, and some implications for further research are identified.

2. PROJECT WORK IN ORGANISATIONS – EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES

Traditional project management theory has been criticised for its lack of underlying empirical evidence (cf Packendorff, 1995). This criticism has mostly been put forward by scientists outside the schools of engineering from which the theory once emanated, and it has also been supported by an increasing number of detailed empirical studies on project organising. The basic question behind these studies has usually been if project management theory provides an accurate explanation of the realities of project work, or if there are other aspects or dimensions that have been ignored so far. In the following, we will analyse how projects has been described as empirical experience by relating some existing international studies.

2.1 The construction project (Kadefors, 1997)

The background of this study was that an international construction company was to erect a new central school in a major Swedish town, and that the researcher participated in the project to study the significance of informal relations between the contracting parties during the project. In this project, the municipality was actively involved throughout the construction process, and interacted with the main contractor on a daily basis. The main contractor then signed contracts with different sub-contractors and recruited personnel for the task. Since the construction process was fairly complicated, a formalised communication system was set up by the parties, implying a set of written reports to be produced on a regular basis and frequent meetings on different hierarchical levels to which all involved were obliged to attend. The engineering consultant that had been responsible for planning the whole construction process was employed to provide the parties with neutral data on

construction progress (which in fact implied that he was to evaluate the consequences of his own planning). The relation between these three parts became conflict-laden over time, however; the municipality soon discovered that many activities in the project became more expensive than planned, and the construction company claimed that this was a result of changes, delays and architectural additions caused by the municipality and the consultant rather than of poor budgeting. The parties also tried to use the formalised communication system to put blame on each other, and when the final accounting report showed a significant overrun, each party tried to establish their own “truth” about the reasons for this. Afterwards, the representative of the municipality described the relations within the project as a political game, where he tried to get maximum output for minimum input. The signed contract did, from his view, not represent the end of that game, but rather the start of it.

2.2 Product development: The Japan project (Söderlund, 1998)

The Japan project was organised as a combined R&D and installation project by the mobile telephone division of Swedish telecom group Ericsson. After a long period of negotiations, Ericsson had obtained their first contract on a mobile telephone system on the Japanese market, but the installation (which was performed by Swedish personnel at 147 sites in the Tokyo area) could not be done without some adaptation and development of Ericsson’s existing technical solutions. Söderlund studied this project with the purpose of increasing the knowledge on the significance of deadlines and the dynamics of competence development in project work. The contract had been negotiated under severe competition from other telecom companies, and the resulting time schedule was most ambitious, in fact impossible to follow, given that traditional methods of project management were employed. To overcome this situation, the project manager selected the most experienced personnel available, and by creating an infrastructure for information exchange within the project organisation, it was possible to implement several sub-projects in parallel to each other without making any time consuming mistakes (the so called “fountain model”). For project management, this meant a continuous balance act between quality and time, where managers actively must keep focus on deadlines among experienced engineers used to put technical specifications first. Project employees were expected to devote a substantial amount of time to information exchange with colleagues, and they were also expected to keep deadlines no matter what consequences this implied for technical quality and private life. One could say that project employees were expected to be both technical and social experts, but that the project should always have priority over private life. In the end, the project could be delivered on time, and it came to be regarded as the main step of establishing the Ericsson group as a major player on the Japanese telecom market.

2.3 The welfare project: Improving life conditions of retired people (Boklund, 1996)

Boklund’s study of the welfare project was originally made in the purpose of evaluating practices of fieldwork within social services. The project itself was initiated by the city administration in a large town as a research project concerning the life conditions of poor retired people in suburbs, and as time went by the researchers (who were also experienced social workers) also made some attempts at testing their ideas in practice. The reason for this was that the data collection in the project was administered from a rented office in one of the suburbs, and that office gradually developed into a meeting point for the retired in the area. The formal project task was, however, still limited to the collection and processing of research data, and when this was over parts of the team had to leave for other tasks in the city administration. Those left claimed that their efforts had become indispensable for the retired people in the area, and they were able to convince some managers in the city administration to provide continuous economic support for salaries and rental of the project office. They developed an own way of working, according to which they were neither friends to the elderly nor formal representatives for the city, but just a welcoming and listening resource. This philosophy even became a vision for the whole city administration when the charismatic project manager tried to obtain permanent funding and implementation in all districts. The external evaluators (including Boklund herself) that studied the model saw a problem in that almost all operations were dependent upon the specific individuals in the project team, a conclusion that the project manager took seriously. She therefore recruited some experienced psychiatrists from the regional health care authorities in order to expand competencies of the team and to bring in personnel with fresh and new ideas. After some time serious problems emerged in the new team; the old team had an informal *ad hoc* culture, while the newcomers demanded formal planning and evaluation of all operations. It appeared that the project manager and her hand-picked team with their un-bureaucratic and flexible style defended their way of working and were most un-flexible when it came to changes in their own habits. The newcomers then left the team and established a team of their own, which of course was seen as a failure of all involved. New evaluations explained it by referring to lack of structure and planning in the project and the dependence on the visionary project manager (i.e. circumstances that in the beginning were seen as the success factors of the project).

2.4 Corporate change: Re-engineering project management (Boudès et al,1998)

The corporate change project was at first designed as a learning program, where the researchers was brought into the firm in order to question the current notions of project management and to contribute to the development of new such notions. The firm, French chemical giant Rhône-Poulenc, was in the process of shifting focus from large-scale generic products to innovative high-performance products, and saw it as necessary to renew the way development projects was managed. It appeared that this renewal required a redefinition of project management, from industrial to innovative projects, and the researchers could thus follow the consequences of the learning program. The program itself implied active project evaluations and round table discussions, and came to be an arena of dispute over the very notion of project management. In the existing thought model of project management, a project was a task that required careful planning, involved sequential activities, being the consequence of an active decision made by a visible client to which the project manager was expected to be an obedient server. The learning program started a process in which the project concept was reserved for certain tasks only, and where projects was seen as the result of an active, powerful project manager whose challenge in planning was to reduce implementation time by concurrent engineering principles. While many of the participants in the learning programme were able to produce project narratives and reflect upon them, some saw the whole exercise as a way of reinforcing their existing habits and to display themselves as knowledgeable professionals. Many had the attitude that they were already experts in project management, and that there were no need for any radical change.

2.5 The cooperation project (Pettersson, 1999)

The subject of inquiry in Pettersson's study was a cooperation project funded by the European Union, aiming at improving the development of the tourism industry in a stagnating rural area in Sweden. A large number of small entrepreneurs in the industry participated, as did representatives of different local and regional authorities. For the daily operations, a full-time project manager was hired (his work-load became much more than that however), supported by a project management group of non-salaried participants. The basic reason for the project was cooperation, i.e. that the participants could together make the area much more attractive for tourism than they could if working separately on their own. After a very optimistic start, it appeared a serious conflict when one of the most active participants established a reservations office for the area without coordinating it with the other stakeholders. The conflict gave rise to a notion of different "wings" among the participants and was never entirely solved, and it became the subject for continuous speculation and discussion in the many meetings that were held during the rest of the project. The project manager and the project management group worked very actively and intensively with the project, and were also able to organise joint service packages that could be offered to prospective tourists. There was, however, few instances of spontaneous cooperation among the participants, and one of the "wings" started to organise events of their own outside the project. The usual view among those involved was that the project seemed more successful from the outside than it actually was. Pettersson explains the problems by referring to a lack of trust among the participants, and points at the problems connected with managing projects where the stakeholders in fact are more loyal to themselves than to the project.

2.6 Empirical descriptions of projects: A gender analysis

Usually, new forms of organising work are presented in a harmonic way, i.e. that they are beneficial both to companies and their employees. One usual argument is that new forms of organising gives employees increased control over the work process and creates space for their creativity, which also implies higher performance and improved profitability for the company. Increased freedom at work also imply that the individual is given increased responsibility for his/hers own performance, however; you can quickly be assigned to interesting tasks, but you can be removed from it just as fast. In most texts on management it is repeatedly established that managers must tolerate mistakes and experimentation from employees, but this does not mean that they do so in practice. Even in new organisational forms economic control is ever-present, which of course depends on that authority can be decentralised but never responsibility. Projects are therefore not necessarily different to other organisational forms when it comes to the classic problem of balancing between creativity and control.

Even though the empirical cases referred to above were made with different purposes in mind and involved different sorts of projects, established project management thinking can be found in them all. Concepts such as economic control, rationality, task orientation, planning, formal decision systems and hierarchies appear in all descriptions and seem to be the taken-for-granted view on how to be successful in project work. In the construction project, the political game between the different actors were seen as a natural and rational part of the implementation process, and – which was also the case in the Japan project – formal reporting systems and hierarchies were seen as a panacea to most possible problems. In the welfare project and the cooperation project, however, the differences between the actors implied difficulties in maintaining common project goals, separating individuals from project purposes and establishing firm project hierarchies, which was also identified as serious problems by the researchers. The learning programme in Rhône-Poulenc actually had to deal with these conceptions in order for

some learning to take place, since one of the basic problems of the organisation was an old-fashioned view of what project management was about. The traditional male norms of project management theory can thus also be found in empirical accounts of project work, where they appear as guiding pre-conceptions of both project participants and external researchers/evaluators.

At the same time, it should be established that the five projects referred to above were not exclusively organised from the male norms of project management theory. In the construction project it was repeatedly claimed that aesthetic aspects of the building were just as important as technical and monetary ones, and in the Japan project managers realised that the “fountain model” of communication implied a social interaction that could not be reduced to formal reporting only. The other three projects were more process- than goal oriented; most positive results was built upon human relations, social interaction and close connections between the tasks and the personalities of individuals. When these factors were not present, neither was project success.

An obvious conclusion of this analysis is that all projects exhibited both male and female norms in their organisation of work, an observation that concerns both project participants and external researchers. This means that projects cannot be reduced to be a “male” or “female” way of working, but that it is most important how individual project participants choose to reproduce established norms and produce new ones (of course with the reservation that some individuals have more power to influence collective norms than others). Moreover, project work cannot be isolated from the rest of the lives of participants, since many of these norms imply consequences for the relation between work and private life for the individuals. To understand how project work is involved in the construction of gender, one must thus not only analyse project management theory and cases of project organising, but also how individuals live their lives with project work. Even though this empirical task is still ahead of us, we can offer one empirical case here on how an individual manage a project and how the form of life is implicated by the form of work.

3. PROJECT WORK FOR INDIVIDUALS – EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES

In order to gain some initial insights on project work from an individual perspective, three case studies of individuals were carried out. All three are 50 year old women, but they differ in many aspects (as do all the men that has been the empirical base of most organisational theories for the past century). Data was collected over a longer time through recurring in-depth interviews. The first interview was mainly devoted to listening, in order not to impose any theoretical framework on the interview situation. During this first session, both interviewees told us about their career and life in general, and these “stories” were then analysed out of the framework described above. In the following sessions, the interviewees were confronted with some of their own statements and also with our analysis of these statements. The relation between researchers and interviewees could thus be developed into some degree of familiarity and trust, which meant that the interviewees opened up their initial statements for questioning and refinement, and they were also able to articulate trends in their lives that they had not been aware of before.

3.1 Mrs B

The first individual, here called Mrs B, currently holds a position as CEO of a regional broadcasting company in Sweden, and she has moved both between jobs, industries and countries during her career. She graduated from faculty of arts at her university, and her main interest was to start working at a museum. Since the interesting jobs at the big museums required years of experience, she took an exam from an advertising school and started to work for an advertising agency. She found the agency a bit superficial and macho-oriented, and was soon recruited to produce travel services for foreign tourists. After some intense years she applied for a job as tour leader and was assigned a large hotel on Gran Canaria. She did not stay for long since she felt that the whole environment there was artificial, and the travel company gave her a job as director in an Italian seaside resort. She stayed there for four years, started and finished a marriage, and went home to Sweden with her daughter.

After graduating as a teacher at a Swedish university she started to work part-time in schools, but soon got a job as a copywriter at an advertising agency. After some years she was appointed CEO of the agency, but when the agency had to give financial support to other companies in the same group she felt that it was time to step out of her managerial role. She applied for a job as director of a local museum, and after reorganizing the museum she was recruited to become cultural director in a medium-size town. During this period, she learnt a lot about leading political organizations, and she enjoyed working with culture in society. When the largest broadcasting company in the region started to search for a new CEO, she applied, encouraged by the employees in the company. She had the same feeling about the new job as always; an initial period of enthusiasm and brave

ideas, and then a period of anxiety and regret. But in the end, she now had the possibility of working creatively with culture and media, often on a national basis.

She describes most of her jobs in terms of projects; she is always employed for specific reasons, and she sooner or later feels that her task is done and that it is time for her to leave and to do something else. Beside describing her work life as a series of projects, she also recognizes work as a life-long project, involving different contexts and experiences.

3.2 Dr S

The second, Dr S, is a clinic head at a local hospital in a medium-size Swedish town, where she has spent her whole career. After graduating as a medical doctor, she became interested in working as a district medical officer and decided to work with emergency treatment for some years in order to gain experience. She remained with the emergency ward, however, and started to investigate how rehabilitation efforts could be better coordinated with emergency care. These activities are usually viewed as separate parts of hospitals, but for Dr S they had to be integrated in order to ensure good rehabilitation results. After some years, she started a dissertation project, where she was able to apply her ideas to a certain category of patients.

As a graduated M.D., she became involved in teaching and further research in the same area, but she also continued working for the same clinic as before in order not to lose touch with practical medicine and patients. In parallel to a large research project, she was involved in a series of investigations and board assignments outside the hospital, where she learnt a lot about national and international trends in medicine and health care organization. She also had to assume increased administrative duties at her home clinic, and became involved in both administrative and medical projects there while maintaining some of her external assignments. The hospital was reorganized, rebuilt and redefined, and when the economic recession started in the beginning of the 90's, she became head of the clinic. She immediately saw the need for organizational development, but she also noticed that the politicians in the county was investigating ways of downsizing the hospital structure. In parallel to a number of decentralization, rationalization and management accounting projects, she was thus also involved in the task of defending the hospital (including its emergency ward) and articulating an alternative vision for the future. As a consequence of the change projects, a number of departments were incorporated in her own clinic, and in collaboration with the new hospital CEO she tried to convince the politicians to redefine the hospital into an integrated local care center.

On the surface, she has a stable long-term position and a solid administrative and academic career, but her actual description of her work life is that it has been a series of short-term assignments, issues and goals. Her stable position at the hospital is merely a facade; her daily work consists of managing different projects.

3.3 Mrs A

Mrs A is a woman who in the 1970's initiated the start of a Swedish school in an other European country, a school that became one of the largest and most well-known among Swedish schools abroad. At the time, she was living in the capital of that country with her family, and it was when her children was to start school at the age of six that she got the idea to start a Swedish school. The story of that project is described below, mostly in her own words except for names of individuals and geographical locations.

When Mrs A's son started school, he had to use a working language that he was unable to understand. In the city where they lived, there were several schools for foreign children, so they moved him to a school whose language were usually seen as being culturally proximate to Swedish. The problem that appeared was that one failure often leads to another if you do not solve the basic dilemma; after one month their son was in trouble anew and she became depressed on his behalf. She did not consider moving back to Sweden again, however; instead she saw the situation as a big challenge.

After discussion with other Swedish parents in the city, she understood that there were many other families in similar situations, so she decided to start a Swedish school. She constructed an ambitious survey to all the parents, and she then went to a big parents' meeting arranged by the local Swedish church. As invited guest they had the adviser for foreign schools from the authorities in Stockholm, Victor, a person that came to be most important to the project. Victor was on his way to Geneva to help starting up a Swedish school there, so he gave her the written regulations for that school and told her how to proceed. He also told her not to take herself too seriously, a piece of advice that she has found most useful since then.

Only women came to be involved in the practical work; "There was not a man as far as you could see with your eyes, just girls, housewives like me." The rumour was out in the Swedish colony, and one of the women who practiced law wrote down the

regulations for the school. The school itself then became formalised as a foundation. They also obtained a classroom, a “ping-pong room” in a nearby castle. Some of her friends acted as teachers, and the single class comprised seven children. The problem now was to meet the demands for economic support from the Swedish government, who would pay the teachers’ salaries if there were twelve children in the school (of which six at the junior level and six at the intermediate level). She had very good contacts with Victor, who supported the project among his colleagues in the government administration, and they also elected a man as chairman for the school in order to gain legitimacy in a country where 65% of all adult women were housewives.

When the next teaching year started they had already initiated a senior level, and one year later the first high school students were registered. It appeared that it had been a big latent demand for the school in the Swedish colony, a demand that had been hidden inside each family as they struggled on with their respective children in local schools. After half a year they had 50 pupils, some months later 70. Mrs A worked 32 hours a week in teaching, and her own children were thus always close to her during the days.

3.2 Empirical descriptions of individuals: A gender analysis

The story on Mrs A is of course much longer, and it ends with her moving back to Sweden with her husband after over a decade as director of the school. She is now dean of a prestigious private school in the Stockholm area, and her children has since long left home. The pedagogical ideology she developed in the 70’s is still there, with respect for the individual and encouragement and joy as prerequisites for learning. What is evident from a gender perspective is that the project is female by nature, where work, private life and children are combined into a whole. As we discussed above, traditional project management theory conveys an implicit message that successful project work demands complete devotion to goals notwithstanding the effects on private life. But Mrs A’s project describes an alternative view; a project being an integrated life form where work is balanced against other aspects. There are of course other circumstances worth noticing from a gender perspective, i.e. the male chairman as the legitimate symbol of the school. Mrs A is most aware of gender structures, and she use them pragmatically for the best of the project.

Concerning Dr S she should be able to find security and continuity in her profession. We can say that she knows the health care sector and feel at home in it. But on the other hand, her managerial position is constantly altered in a way that often lies beyond her control. When new projects and structures are to be implemented at the hospital, she is automatically involved (with or against her will), leaving her with a constant high workload and decision problems concerning what projects, conflicts and debates to devote her energy and time to. Even though Dr S has not been exposed to the same professional and social turbulence as have Mrs B, she has also found it necessary to develop guiding values and a personal integrity that can persist in the never-ending muddling through of everyday complexity (i.e. a way to find some sort of meaning in her projectified life). In almost all the different projects and investigations in which she is involved, she is thus able to apply her own health care ideology, thereby using the projects for her own long-term strategies. In fact, this ideology (which emphasizes local integrated care centers as the backbone of Swedish health care in the future) offers concrete inspiration and is reflected in most of her clinical, administrative and academic work. This can also be traced in her view of leadership, with a strong emphasis on decentralization, autonomous sub-unit leaders and respect for the individual. She also views change as something necessary and thinks that neither organizational structures nor individuals should be kept forever.

Unlike Dr S, Mrs B has no stable professional identity to rely on, and in her main profession (manager/leader) her personality and involveness is much as important as her experiences from cultural and medial organizations. She has a high degree of control over her projectified life, but at the expense of long-term job security and stable social relationships. The different positions she has held during her career has mostly been somewhat temporary by nature, e.g. leading an organization through a change process or towards a step in its long-term development. If we compare her working-environment with Dr S there are not the same institutionalised conditions governing her the whole time; she moves between different institutionalised structures. Perhaps is this the core in her career; that she is able to work with organizations in new ways without being socialized or having a long experience of their culture. Her guiding values through life and different work has always had an ideological core where the importance of ‘educating the people’ is emphasized. In most different leadership positions, she has approached her tasks with the intent that she and her colleagues in some way shall contribute to the cultural development of society. Work in the cultural sector carries with it a responsibility to link people to culture and tradition, she says, and she is convinced that most people want to learn and have cultural interests beside their daily life and work.

All three women have in common that they actively desire life-style integration. They are striving for keeping the balance between family and work. In all our cases we can see that social gender structures form these women’s ways of describing their

possibilities and view on work. They are all concerned about affiliation in their work and they also tend to link private life with working life in their narrations (especially Mrs A and B). When they are offered work in new projects or new organizations, they incorporate life outside work in their decision. The main difference in this respect is, of course, that the kind of transitions that Mrs B undergoes from time to time has major implications for her family concerning where to live, which schools to go to etc., while Dr S and Mrs A has been able to keep their families in the same town and to some extent protect them from turbulence at work.

4. PROJECT WORK AS CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER: MALE THEORY AND HUMAN PRACTICE?

The projects described above are characterised by so called male norms such as rationality, efficiency and planning, but there are also female norms such as feelings, communication and care present. To us this means that it is hard to claim that projects in practice are male or female only by nature; rather there is a male theory but what we can call a human practice where traditional manifestations of male and female norms exists simultaneously. If we refer to Mrs A's school project it is obvious that she is most rational in handling e.g. gender structures and goal focused (the school could start when planned). At the same time the project was characterised by caring for children, and Mrs A integrated the project with her own private life. Both Dr S and Mrs B saw it as necessary to complement their short-term project work with long-term ambitions and ideologies to find meaning in what they did (a single project in itself was not seen as meaningful if it could not be connected to other projects and to personal development). The other cases of project work also contains both male and female norms, i.e. Söderlund's study where communication was most important but where project management also insisted that employees should give priority to the project over private life. It should again be pointed out, however, that since we have not made the empirical studies ourselves we do not have the same possibilities of analysing these matters as the researchers that have actually been there interviewing and observing.

By this we claim that projects are different from each other concerning what norms that are reproduced and produced, and that certain projects and certain forms of individual project work reproduce traditional gender structures to a higher degree than others. Project management research have since decades been reproducing existing views of project work as time-limited, goal focused, planning oriented, dependent upon the devotion of employees etc. To some extent this can be explained by the fact that many researchers have favored technical projects over change- or research projects when selecting empirical cases, but the explanation can also be that the research has been limited by strong theoretical conceptions; if empirical cases of project work has not conformed to the theoretical definition of projects, then they have not been included. That the projects selected in this way behaves according to theory is not surprising. In the same way as general organisation theory have difficulties in letting go of the concept of organisations when claiming that organising processes is what matters, project management theory is strongly attached to the project definition in its empirical foundations. There is an evident risk that project management theory, through its normative character, becomes self-reproducing in the way that it guides researchers' expectations on what to find in practical project work.

Methodologically this means that empirical research on project work should be made using other theoretical perspectives than project management theory if we shall be able to gain new knowledge on project work and its consequences. Moreover, it is important with empirical research on the level of the individual if we want to understand project work using the practical experience of individuals; otherwise there is a risk that we only uncover intersubjective experiences that can be related to the existing body of project management theory. An individual perspective has the advantage that the boundaries of the project do not become the boundaries of our empirical study; instead, it is the individual and his life experience that is focused. One suggestion is to use a narrative approach, where individuals can formulate and reflect over their life stories and how project work can be relate to them. There is also the possibility of longitudinal approaches where a project worker is followed over a time in order to formulate knowledge on how this individual reproduces and produces gender structures in interaction with others in an everyday setting.

Most interesting is also the notion of cultural differences in the global economy; project theories as well as practices are likely to differ between countries, and so are the life forms of men and women. Like all other forms of organising, projects operate in a cultural context with specific norms and values, and it would be a big mistake to think that projects can be handled the same way in different countries. While organisations and organisational practices has been subject to cross-cultural comparisons since the 1960's, there still exists very few attempts at describing such differences in project work on a theoretical level. Moreover, the implications for how private life affect projects in different cultural contexts is also in need for further research; from a gender perspective it is obvious to conclude that different individuals have quite different possibilities of fulfilling the expectations on project work. While project management theory (like general management theory, cf Clegg, 1990) is a rational and normative anglo-saxian construct, project practices and life forms are likely to vary significantly.

Project work implies a reproduction of traditional gender structures, at the same time as it contributes to new structures. By investigating other types of projects than those oriented towards technological issues we have the possibility to increase and enhance knowledge about project work and its consequences. If we use the individual level of analysis, we can also relate projects as a work form to individuals' life forms. The notion of life forms (Jakobsen & Karlsson, 1993) represents a complement but also a complication to inquiry on project work, since the whole lives of project workers has to be taken into account. One example of this is that many women live in so called mixed life forms, where they both have work forms designed for men (such as project work) and private situations where they have the main responsibility for the home and the children (i.e. the traditional life form for women). Home work does not disappear because a woman takes on demanding project tasks, nor do the workload of her husband (which, of course, is an active choice on his behalf). Empirical research on project workers' life forms therefore also implies research on individuals' family lives. What is problematic with existing life form concepts from a gender perspective is that they are formulated for industrial society, implying that "pure" life forms (such as the male work life form and the female housewife form) are described as the normal way of living, while the "mixed" forms of women (and of an increasing number of men) are pictured as deviant and unnatural. Project management theory is a part of this, describing devotion to the project and to work as natural (i.e. the pure work life form). We have shown above that mixed forms can be just as natural (i.e. Mrs A's integrated life form where projects and family life are two indivisible aspects of the same life).

The aim of this paper was to analyse how project as a work form is constructed in theory and practice from a gender perspective. An important conclusion of this analysis is that project management theory tends to reproduce itself due to its normative character and its function as a basis of a new profession. Project management theory conveys a lot of traditional male norms on how work should be conducted, such as planning, instrumental rationality, preference for the material and the tangible, goal focus etc (jfr Billing, 1997). It should be pointed out, however, that it is not only men who reproduce these norms in project work; there are also many women assuming these norms and reproducing them through action. Our objection, after analysing the empirical experiences outlined above, is that this "male theory" is not fully reproduced in practice, and that project management theory thus do not provide a sufficient account of the practice of project work. "The human project" contains both traditional male and female norms, where e.g. the focus on planning can be combined with an orientation towards caring and social processes. But to make this "human project" visible, we need a gender perspective, focusing projectification rather than projects, individuals' life forms rather than their work forms, and where traditional project management theory is treated as a problematic pre-conception rather than as a realistic expectation on empirical reality.

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