



# Damaged identities: Examining identity regulation and identity work of Gulf project managers

Michael Cowen<sup>\*</sup>, Damian Hodgson

*Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Manchester M15 6PB, United Kingdom*

Received 12 June 2014; received in revised form 13 June 2015; accepted 22 June 2015  
Available online 15 July 2015

## Abstract

Research on the human side of project management is largely overshadowed by its technically focused counter-part. This results in a dangerous neglect of the impacts of a demanding project life and project managers' efforts to construct and sustain a valuable and valued identity at work. In this study of one Middle Eastern IT company, drawing on project management guides, company documents and interview responses from project managers, we examine the regulation of project manager identity using the lens of 'identity work'. We show that intense identity work can be triggered from project life within a challenging environment, and identify various coping strategies employed by the managers interviewed. In some cases, however, we found that these pressures may lead to the project manager experiencing a temporarily "damaged" self-identity. We discuss the practical implications arising from our analysis for project management associations and organizations alike, and opportunities for future research.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Identity; Human impacts

## 1. Introduction

Globally, the project has increasingly become a preferred form of changing organizations and society (Hobday, 2000). The effective management of such projects is thus a matter of increasing concern, and project management associations (PMA) have devoted substantial efforts in recent years to codify best practices with the aim of improving project success rates. PMAs offer various frameworks, bodies of knowledge and other prescriptive tools to support project managers (PMs) in delivering their roles. However, in practice, executives, steering committees, sponsors, and clients alike pass significant pressure, stress and risk to the PM who is put in charge (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006).

This stress and pressure in project life takes many forms, such as limited time, strict budgets, dealing with the multitude of project stakeholder interests, and above all having to deliver

the change as defined in the project mandate. Yet, perhaps owing to its long history with engineering,<sup>1</sup> project management generally follows a rational-linear view of change with what Buchanan (1991) called the content and control agendas, and pays significantly less attention to what Asquin et al. (2010) among others have referred to as the need to bring into focus the human side of the discipline (see also Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006; Hodgson, 2002; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007; Richmond and Skitmore, 2006).

This research is in response to this call. The motive for this study came directly from Author 1's experiences as a practicing PM and the authors increasing concern for PMs who both work under difficult contexts, tight technical and bureaucratic controls. On one hand, managing projects offer a stimulating life but on the other it may come at a high cost including loneliness and long

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

*E-mail addresses:* [michael.cowen@postgrad.mbs.ac.uk](mailto:michael.cowen@postgrad.mbs.ac.uk) (M. Cowen), [damian.hodgson@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:damian.hodgson@manchester.ac.uk) (D. Hodgson).

<sup>1</sup> It is well known that project management owes much to its engineering history, however, there is a commonplace that has emerged that sees projects as universally assisting all kinds of project engineering or otherwise (See Paton et al., 2010).

working hours (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007). This paper directly adds to this reticent conversation using the lens of identity theory, an approach that remains relatively neglected in project based organizations (Andersson, 2009). Identity theory, both in terms of the external regulation of identity and the work which individuals engage in to create and maintain a coherent and valued self-identity, is directly relevant as it sheds light upon the often-overlooked self-disciplinary aspects of project management which contribute to both the pressure and rewards of managing projects. This study explores the effects on PMs self-identity resulting from project life. It draws upon research conducted in the Gulf region, and specifically within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>2</sup> context. The authors investigate the ways in which PM identities are regulated, the kind of identity work which is visible, and the effects/outcomes of this on their self-identity i.e., on their sense of self? The argument developed is that idealized PMs as discursively constructed by Project Management Associations and organizations proves to be difficult to realize, particularly perhaps in a non-western setting. The research highlights the potential detrimental effects on the PMs' sense of self, what the authors introduce as temporarily 'damaged' identities.

The research contribution of this paper is as follows: First this paper briefly reviews the vast scholarly interest in identity theory that has had only sporadic penetration into mainstream PM research to date. This is with the hope of generating more interest into the human side of project life that is not oriented to narrowly instrumental or utilitarian agendas. In order to complete this task the paper provides an introduction to one branch of identity theory—that of post structural/processual research.

This is not to say that this branch of identity is necessarily superior to the many other branches (e.g., psychology, social identity theory), in fact, some (see Brown, 2014) see identity as potentially providing a conceptual bridge for more engaged interdisciplinary work. Second, the paper reviews the existing body of literature dealing with identity within the project management discipline. Third, through an empirical study of managers within the project management group of a GCC-based IT outsourcing company, the authors illustrate the ways in which project manager identity is regulated, focusing on certain organizational and professional PM practices that generate intense identity work on the part of PMs. In certain circumstances this leads to what the authors introduce as temporarily 'damaged' identities.

## 2. Introducing identity theory

There is a broad and influential stream of research across the social sciences which uses identity as a way in which to unpack social processes in a variety of settings. According to Giddens (1991), the maintaining a coherent sense of identity for the individual and maintaining ones' place in society is an important form of security in a complex fast changing world. Identity is regarded as an important lens as it shapes how people see themselves and how they see others, it shapes thinking and

behavior, impacting onto personal wellbeing and organization performance (Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity theory is one of the more popular analytical frames in management studies today (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown, 2014). As an approach, it offers greater understanding into the processes by which individuals, groups and organizations deal with change, ambiguity and complexity. However, one immediate problem with adopting identity in research is the vast plurality of ontological and epistemological approaches.

Brown's (2014) review of identity literature found no less than 1129 articles published in business and management journals. The authors' traversal of identity theory highlighted a number of debates and positions will be placed on a grid as a heuristic for IJPM readers. On one axis, identity research has targeted variable units of analysis from the individual (psychology), through to groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), through to organizations (Stuart and Whetten, 1985), and onto society (du Gay, 1996). On the other axis, these objects of analysis identity are conceptualized in differing ways; from being relatively stable, coherent, robust, objective and essential to one extreme to being unstable, insecure, ambiguous and fluid to the other (Butler, 2005). Attempting to cover such a broad terrain within a single research project is not possible, therefore selecting a suitable identity lens was required. From the first axis, choosing a specific object of analysis as solely individual, solely a group or the organization appeared to be particularly unhelpful. The authors wanted to maintain a flexible gaze from the individual, through organization, through to PMAs. On the second axis, neither end of these two extremes of identity as essential, that is to say to be discovered; or identity to be in total flux appealed as a useful starting point. Therefore, in order to be flexible on the nature of identity and the object of analysis a middle way was adopted, that of the processual school.

This processual approach attempts to sit between the poles, identity perhaps being more stable at times but under duress or change identity will become unstable until both context and individual 're-settles'. This reflects a social constructivist perspective that embraces "the possibilities of emergence, plurality, malleability and discontinuity of identity and social embeddedness of identity processes" (Nach and Lejeune, 2010, p.4), and maintains a processual view of becoming, rather than being (Chia, 1995)—asking the question 'who am I, or who are we?' but regards any answers as always only provisional (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

The authors turned to the influential work of Alvesson and Willmott (2002) who directly tackle this middle way between determinism and agency. This paper will now attempt to explain how their processual model works, through three elements—identity regulation; identity work; and self-identity.

Identity regulation is typically seen as a range of external forces, deliberately manipulated with the aim of "regulating employees 'insides'—their self-image, their feelings and identifications....a pervasive and increasingly intentional modality of organizational control" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002 p626). Many writers on identity regulation suggest that this is an increasingly important focus for organizational attempts to influence the behavior of employees. Alvesson and Willmott's

<sup>2</sup> Gulf Cooperation Council states include Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/275562>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/275562>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)