Performing arts and the art of performing – On co-construction of project work and professional identities in theatres

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Abstract

While working by projects and re-constructing organisational and institutional norms on how projects should be, individuals also successively construct an image of themselves in relation to these norms. In this article, we will thus analyse how people in project-based operations simultaneously construct projects and individual identities.

The analysis of interviews from two theatres indicates that project work and professional identities are co-constructed by means of mutual confirmation, simultaneous confirmation/disconfirmation, and mutual disconfirmation. The individual projects become arenas and critical incidents for such co-construction. These discourses are not always consistent with each other, but they are important for what the individuals expect from projects and what project managers expect from individuals.
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Keywords: Teams; Individuals; Culture; Critical theory; Identity construction; Performing arts

1. Project work and individual identity

1.1. Project-based work and identity construction

The increasing use of projects is usually expected to imply increased task focus, better conditions for learning, renewal and flexibility, less bureaucratic forms for management control, etc., [9,26]. This trend is mainly perceived as a positive one for contemporary organisations given that proper administrative systems are used [15]. The basic reason for this perception seems to be that the project is perceived as a way of avoiding all the classic problems of bureaucracy, inertia and rigidity with which most ''normal'' organisations are struggling [7,26]. In many industries and companies, the project has thus become the normal work form [11].

While the existence, benefits and administrative hardships of project-based organising is well documented in the literature [10,11,15] there is a lack of empirical studies

inquiring into the abovementioned development from critical perspectives, emphasizing the consequences for individuals and society [6]. The few studies actually made indicate a clear need to pursue such a line of inquiry. Viewed from the perspective of the project worker, projects are often stimulating, but also sources of stress, loneliness, disrupted family lives, superficial work place relations, etc., [13,20,21,25]. One might even say that projects is a way of disciplining the individual in a way that organisations in general cannot do anymore [17], that they are not necessarily panaceas to all sorts of bureaucracy problems [7,18], and that the work form reinforce traditional masculine attitudes to work and life [5,13,21].

In our earlier studies, it appeared that many individuals working by projects tended to describe projects as extraordinary and temporary work contexts where 'normal rules' did not apply [21]. Especially striking was the differences in how they viewed work conditions; while the organisations were described as friendly places that took care of their employees, projects were described as stressful, achievement-oriented places where everybody had to take care of themselves. This points at that the notion of

working in a project brings with it expectations on several aspects of the work situation, expectations that are institutionally given by project theory and practice and re-constructed by the project workers in interaction [28].

At the same time, they also successively constructed an image of themselves in relation to these norms. If project work is different from other work, they were also professionally different from other workers (an opinion also emphasized by the emergence of PMI and IPMA certifications). When asked about if project work requires special skills or traits, many claimed that higher levels of discipline and dedication were needed, and they also took some pride in being amongst the chosen ones for these hard endeavours [22]. This points at that not only are individuals reinforcing established notions on project work while working by projects – they also at the same time continuously construct their own professional identities, reinforcing notions about themselves as professional, committed and structured enough to endure the hardships of project work. In other words, a project is here seen as a process of co-construction of the project form and of project worker professional identity. In this paper, we will thus analyse how people in project-based operations socially construct projects and individual professional identities over time.

1.2. Theatres as project-based organisations

One of the most established 'industries' when it comes to project-based organizing, is the cultural sector [27]. Apart from some ongoing operations in museums, schools, etc., most cultural activities in society are based in temporary organizing processes – events, exhibitions, plays, publications, movie production, installations, etc. In the opera and theatre sector – which is the empirical focus of this article – each production of a play is organised as a project [9]. During the project, manuscripts are finished, scenic design and costumes developed, plays and music rehearsed. In parallel to these internal activities, the upcoming play is marketed, printed material is designed, etc., – all with the first night as the absolute, fixed and undisputable deadline. Most theatre producers and directors work with project planning in order to be able to coordinate everything, and the team often perceive their work in terms of a series of projects [22,27]. The 'theatre industry' is thus a suitable place for the inquiry into how projects are constructed and re-constructed in social interaction. It is also a place where problems of organizing, innovating and working abound, a place where success is hard both to define and claim, not least because a theatre organisation must perform well in artistic, economical, marketing and societal terms simultaneously [30]. Behind this multi-dimensional character of strategic ambitions, we also often find severe ideological conflicts between artistic and managerial norm systems [31], conflicts that usually find their way into each single project. Theatre work is also special in the way that fixed deadlines and demands on extraordinary individual performances characterise the daily organizing of projects. As noted already in 1981 in a study of theatre project management, an important

> "...concern in the management of temporary systems is the effect of outside, personal, or organisational life space on the task performance of participants. This phenomenon is certainly a problem in permanent organisations as well, but this author knows of no serious mention of it in the organisational literature. Typically, there are emotional, financial, and physical fluctuations in individuals' lives that alter their capacity for work. Illness and death in the family, marital problems, house guests, or problems with children may all affect the participant's concentration. New friends, graduations, anniversaries, recognition, or new opportunities all may increase the ability to perform. In the theatrical setting, the ambiguities about expected success, the public nature of the product, and the intensity of the rehearsal period all make the outside influences more powerful in terms of their impact on final performance". [14, p. 41]

The typical theatre project (as described by Dollar [8]) starts with a preproduction phase, a short period of time when directors and stage managers prepares for the upcoming rehearsals. It begins with the selection of production and design teams and includes the analysis of the script, auditions (if actors must be brought in from the outside) and production meetings. At this point, much of the process is driven by the director's artistic intentions. The stage manager and the producer (who might be the same person in smaller organisations) plan for the rehearsal process and the commercial process of marketing and performance planning, respectively.

During the rehearsal period, directors rehearse all parts of the play with the actors and musicians, while other groups of specialists develop all the other things needed. Electrics and lighting must be designed and installed, a sound system developed. Scenic construction people construct the scenic design together with prop masters who build all sorts of smaller items. A lot of work is also carried out at the costume department, where all clothes to be worn by the actors are manufactured. The rehearsal period ends by the so called "Tech weeks" (i.e. the technical rehearsals when all costumes, scenic design, lightning, etc., are used by the actors for the first time), culminating in the preview or 'general rehearsal' where a live audience is admitted. Then, at last, the opening night comes and the project crew may go on to new assignments while actors, musicians and sound & lighting experts continue into the repetitive work of re-performing the play during a number of evenings. Most theatres have a long-term plan of what projects/plays that are to be produced during the upcoming years, usually with fixed rehearsal periods and opening nights. Many of the typical characteristics of project work are thus also to be found in theatre productions, not least because a theatre project has an absolute deadline that can never be postponed.