

The ritualization of transitions in the project life cycle: A study of transition rituals in construction projects



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Abstract

To manage the project life cycle and facilitate transitions, Project Management (PM) research often points to temporal models and structuring devices. However, the social and symbolic facet of transitions in projects remains understudied. Therefore, this research focuses on the ritualization of transitions in projects. Specifically, the aim is to gain insight into the practice and meaning of transition rituals in the project life cycle. To do so we draw from field research in the infrastructure sector where participant-observation was carried out during eight transition rituals in four Dutch construction projects, and 58 interviews were executed with project participants. The contribution to the PM debate on temporary organizing lies in the conceptualization of transition rituals as powerful symbolic *and* strategic practices in the project life cycle, and in the provision of an overview showcasing *how*, *when* and *why* transition rituals are practiced to facilitate transitions and embed a project in its environment.

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1. Introduction

The ever-changing, non-linear, and often unpredictable process that unfolds during a project's life cycle is a main concern in Project Management (PM) research (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Maaninen-Olsson and Müllern, 2009). Project actors experience difficulty in managing and coordinating the project process which is comprised of intricate and drawn-out phase transitions with a series of overlapping sub-projects, phases and/or stages (Marshall and Bresnen, 2013). Moreover, projects are temporary organizational constructs continuously evolving over time and embedded in multiple contexts (Engwall, 2003; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Manning, 2008). In this sense, a project should be understood as a contextual process of change from start to termination (Maaninen-Olsson and Müllern, 2009).

To better understand how this process transpires and can be managed, research increasingly focuses on the project life cycle and in particular the themes of time, duration and temporal structuring (Furst et al., 2004; Lundin and Steinhórrsson, 2003; Söderlund, 2013; Winch, 2014). In this domain, research habitually points to temporal models, such as the Project Life Cycle (PLC) model (King and Cleland, 1983; Westland, 2006), and temporal structuring devices, such as contracts, deadlines and milestones, that are used to organize time and trigger transitions in projects (Cicmil, 2006; Gersick, 1988, 1989, 1994; Manning, 2008; Waller et al., 2002). However, these temporal models and pacing devices remain largely instrumental, shedding little light on the social and symbolic facet of transitions (Cicmil, 2006; Eskerod and Blichfeldt, 2005). Exploring this facet is essential to gain insight into the symbolic practices used by project actors to realize transitions (Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2009).

To fill this gap, this paper takes the ritualization of transitions in the project life cycle as the main research focus. Specifically, the aim is to gain insight into the practice and meaning of

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transition rituals during the project process. Transition rituals are common yet taken for granted symbolic practices in projects, such as signing contracts, project kick-offs, or celebrating milestones. With the exception of several studies (e.g. Berg et al., 2000; Cova and Salle, 2000; Eskerod and Blichfeldt, 2005; Löfgren, 2007) rituals have yet to be addressed in the field of PM. We argue that they should be for two main reasons. First, rituals mark important transition points, life cycles and histories of organizations (Martin, 2002) and are powerfully transformative in bringing about changed social conditions (Alexander et al., 2006). This is particularly relevant for the study of the project life cycle and how transitions are enacted herein. Second, in addition to organization literature, the extant PM literature on rituals confirms their relevance and value, even suggesting that “formal transition and maintenance rites are introduced” in the project life cycle (Eskerod and Blichfeldt, 2005: 502).

To study the role of transition rituals in the project process, we formulate the following research question: *What transition rituals can be discerned in the project process, how and when are they practiced, and what do they mean for project participants?* To answer this question we draw from a qualitative–interpretive field study in the infrastructure sector. Participant-observation was carried out during eight transition rituals in four construction projects in the Netherlands: two project kick-offs in a river expansion project, two kick-offs marking sub-project phase transitions in a subway project, two milestone celebrations in an underground railway project, and two project completions/deliveries in an aboveground railway project. Concurrently, 58 in-depth interviews were executed with project actors who organized, performed or attended the transition rituals, including communication advisors, project managers and employees, contractors and constructors, as well as state officials and political representatives.

The paper makes two main contributions to the debate on temporary organizing in the field of PM. First, this paper conceptualizes transition rituals as powerful symbolic and strategic practices in the management of the project life cycle. Second, it provides an overview of *how*, *when*, and *why* transition rituals are practiced to facilitate transitions and embed a project in its environment. The paper is structured as follows. First, a theoretical framework is provided to conceptualize transition rituals and contextualize the study to construction projects. Second, in the methodological section we discuss how data on transition rituals was collected and analyzed. Next, the findings are presented where interview accounts of project actors are shared to demonstrate *how*, *when* and *why* transition rituals are practiced in construction projects. In the discussion section, we provide an in-depth and theoretically grounded analysis of the findings. Finally, conclusions are drawn concerning the meaningful role transition rituals have in the project life cycle followed by the research contributions, research limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

Dichotomous conceptions of ritual are common in theory. According to Smith and Stewart (2011:11) there “is a need to

reconcile the symbolic and communicative ambiguity of ritualized performances with the functional impact that rituals command.” Or, as Bell (1992) explains, there is a longstanding theoretical tendency to view ritual as a symbolic or sacred activity in sharp contrast with a technical or utilitarian activity. Rather, ritual should be seen as possessing both symbolic and pragmatic aspects simultaneously. Essentially, rituals are dually significant, having on the one side a symbolic character through which meanings and values are expressed, while they also have a tangible character where they can be used strategically to achieve or establish something (Alvesson, 2002; Bell, 2009; Johnson, 2007; Martin, 2002; Smith and Stewart, 2011).

Consequently, Bell (1992: 170) proposes that ritual should be rethought as practice or as “a strategic mode of action effective within certain social orders.” In doing so, she devises the term ‘ritualization’ – alternative to ‘ritual’ – defined as a way of acting that is orchestrated “to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities” (Bell, 1992: 74). This is an important point because ordinary practices are more easily taken for granted owing to their rapid standardization and intrinsic enactment (Geiger, 2009). Conversely, a ritual is a practice ‘made special’ by ascribing symbolic meaning to mundane activities and materials (Martin, 2002; Smith and Stewart, 2011). Specifically, a ritual is ‘made special’ by the rule- and role-governed manner in which it is organized, with predetermined actors and audiences, performed at a predestined time and place, with symbolic words, gestures, and artifacts that serve to signal and express meaning (Alexander et al., 2006; Smith and Stewart, 2011; Trice and Beyer, 1993; Turner, 1977).

2.1. Rituals in organizations

To understand the practice and meaning of rituals in projects it is helpful to review the growing amount of research on rituals in organizations more generally. Trice and Beyer (1984) are the theoretical pioneers of this domain, having provided the first typology of (possibly overlapping) organizational rituals, or ‘rites’: (1) rites of transition (e.g. initiation), (2) rites of degradation (e.g. firing, replacing), (3) rites of enhancement (e.g. promotion), (4) rites of rebirth/renewal (e.g. annual meetings), (5) rites of conflict reduction (e.g. collective bargaining), and (6) rites of integration (e.g. office Christmas party). This typology has also been applied in subsequent research (e.g. Hallier and James, 1999; Islam and Zyphur, 2009; Smith and Stewart, 2011). However, it is not standardized as other types of rituals, such as healing rituals (Powley and Piderit, 2008); closure, parting or ‘death’ rituals (Catasús and Johed, 2007; Sutton, 1987), and creation rituals (Trice and Beyer, 1993) have also been identified, among others.

Organization literature has also elaborated the widespread social significance of rituals, depending on its type and context (Islam and Zyphur, 2009; Kunda, 1992; Smith and Stewart, 2011; Trice and Beyer, 1993). Rituals can act as communication and learning schemes to provide meaning and communicate important values (Cheal, 1992). They can also embody and strengthen the social order, set and underscore significant events, and help manage time and work structure (Ancona et al., 2001; Smith and

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