Embedding projects in multiple contexts – a structuration perspective

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Abstract

Projects are embedded in multiple systemic contexts, e.g. organizations, interorganizational networks and organizational fields, which jointly facilitate and constrain project organizing. As projects partly evolve in idiosyncratic ways as temporary systems, embedding needs to be understood as a continuous process linking projects to their environments. Using structuration theory, this paper argues that projects get embedded in multiple systemic contexts through the constitution of the very structural properties – tasks, times, and teams – that guide project activities. This implies that project constitution and embedding are inseparable systemic processes. This perspective on project constitution and embedding further elaborates a practice-theoretical understanding of temporary organizing.
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1. Introduction

In recent years project researchers have emphasized that projects as temporary systems are embedded in permanent, yet changing systemic contexts that condition project organizing [1–3]. Among these contexts, organizations have been studied for a long time in terms of structures and capabilities they provide for carrying out singular and multiple projects [4,5]. In addition, longer-term customer relationships and multilateral network structures have been recognized as important project organizing contexts [6–9]. Finally, in particular in creative industries, the organizational field has been paid attention to as a 'repository of knowledge' [10,11] and a social infrastructure for project organizing [12,13].

Embeddedness in multiple contexts, however, is not a given structural condition that determines how projects are organized. The very fact that every project is partially unique [14] suggests that projects to some degree detach from their environments and develop in idiosyncratic ways as temporary social systems. At the same time,

projects in professional project businesses rely on routines, norms and practices that establish in various systemic contexts and that both facilitate and constrain project organizing activities [1]. This theoretical paradox of (dis-) embeddedness has not been sufficiently addressed in project research.

Structuration theory [15] may shed light on this phenomenon. By looking at the recursive interplay of action and structure, structuration theory may help understand how projects are constituted and embedded as temporary social systems in multiple contexts. Key to the understanding of this process are the structural properties projects primarily characterize – tasks, times and teams. Structuration theory will be used as a theoretical framework to clarify how these structural properties 'operate' and how they 'link' projects to their multiple systemic contexts – organizations, networks and fields. Embedding will be conceptualized as a continuous process which project participants and stakeholders actively engage in when they enact, transform and reproduce task, time and team features of particular projects and simultaneously relate them to multiple systemic environments. This perspective may stimulate further conceptual and empirical work on

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project embeddedness [11,9,3], while contributing to recent attempts toward developing a practice theory of project organizing [2].

2. The constitution of projects as temporary systems: a structuration perspective

Projects are often regarded as temporary systems reflecting their temporary and complex nature [16,17]. Interestingly, the very constitution of projects as temporary systems is barely understood. That is, little conceptual work has been done to interpret the very characteristics of projects in 'systemic' terms. This, however, is a crucial step for a better comprehension of projects as embedded temporary systems. In the following, a structuration perspective on projects as temporary systems is developed that helps clarify how projects are both constituted and embedded. It is consistent with the 'practice view' of project organizing associated with 'Scandinavian' project research [2].

Structuration theory (ST) is a social theory which looks at the recursive interplay of action and structure in social practice [15,18]. It has been used repeatedly as a theoretical framework for organization and network research [19–23]. In short, ST regards structure as sets of symbolic and normative rules ('rules of signification and legitimation'), and authoritative and allocative resources ('resources of domination'). In conjunction, they enable and constrain action as they get enacted, transformed and reproduced by actors in social practice. Actors are regarded as potentially powerful and knowledgeable agents who apply rules and resources in interaction and, in doing so, impact on the continuous flow of events. They engage in 'reflexive monitoring', that is they continuously observe and assess the conditions and consequences of their actions for themselves and others while (re-) producing, more or less intentionally, the very structural conditions under which they act [15].

Social systems, such as temporary projects and their social contexts, are brought about by social practices, that is regularized activities in which actors apply (and reproduce) sets of symbolic and normative rules, and allocative and authoritative resources. Systems have 'systemic boundaries' insofar as structural properties can be identified that guide action in terms of *specific* (systemic) sets of rules and resources. Systems are further characterized by a certain interdependence of action which gets reproduced through the very activities actors engage in. ST emphasizes that system reproduction is possible only through individual and collective agency. In other words, it cannot be detached from the very activities motivated and powerful actors engage in more or less routinely. However, actors can only engage in systemic activities as they refer to structural properties of the system.

When applying this system perspective to project organizing, structural properties need to be identified that constitute and characterize projects as temporary social systems. From the project literature, three fundamental structural dimensions or properties of projects can be identified, labelled here in short as tasks, times, and teams [17,10].

One key constituent of projects are the *tasks* to be accomplished [17,10]. Tasks refer not only to the overall project objectives, which are linked to certain products, services or other project outcomes, but also to those sub-tasks that are allocated to project participants in the process of accomplishing project goals. The task dimension of projects reflects the idea that projects lead to certain outcomes, guided by 'projections' of desired products or future states [24,25]. To some extent, project tasks are non-routine which makes projects different from permanent and routine forms of organizing [14]. However, project tasks often contain routine elements – familiar 'projections' – which allow for 'economies of repetition' and the development of project capabilities [5]. Yet, not least because projects also contain non-routine elements which can be hardly defined at the beginning, project tasks and their implementation typically remain subject of powerful (re-) negotiation processes among project stakeholders [26].

While tasks guide project activities in terms of what is to be done, *times* inform about how fast, in which order and until when project tasks are to be accomplished [17]. Similar to the task dimension, the time dimension refers both to the time constraint of the whole project and to consecutive deadlines during the project. That is, projects themselves are characterized by their institutionalized endings [27, p. 4,17]; during implementation, deadlines are important temporal structuring devices [28,29]. Times are also related to milestones which mark those situations in which certain tasks are accomplished that are critical for a project to proceed. Finally, like tasks, times are often renegotiated as a project is under way, whereby speed, cost and quality of the outcome are traditionally traded off against each other as criteria for project success.

The third constituting element of projects discussed here are *teams* [17,10]. Like tasks and times, teams may refer to the whole project team or to sub-teams, e.g. directors and cutters in film projects. Project teams are not just constituted by individuals working together temporarily [16], but by positions those actors take [30] and relational practices they engage in from their positions with others during the project. Like tasks and times, team relations can be more or less familiar to those participating in projects which both facilitates and constrains project organizing. Team relations are governed by mechanisms of trust and control, related to the tasks at hand [31,32]. To some extent, however, project teams are also 'negotiated orders' [33], in so far as role expectations and interaction patterns are context-bound and as they need to be readjusted within projects [30].

Importantly, from a structuration perspective, task specifications, time constraints and team relations are structural properties that *jointly* characterize projects as temporary systems. That is, in professional project businesses typically certain project tasks are associated with a certain time it takes to accomplish these tasks as well as with certain team roles and relations that reflect task requirements, e.g. the task of building a small house or of producing a particular