Program group's discursive construction of context: A means to legitimize buck-passing

Jaana Näsänen [*,1], Outi Vanharanta [1]

Aalto University, School of Science, Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, P.O. Box 15500, FI-02015 Aalto, Finland

Abstract

Research on program management has highlighted the need to understand the organizational and social context in which programs are inextricably embedded. In this paper, we explore how the members of a temporary program management group negotiate the scope of its activities through constructing a shared understanding of its operational context. The results of this study demonstrate the discursive patterns through which the program group (1) separates itself from the parent organization and (2) withdraws itself from the responsibility to implement. Through doing this, the program group legitimizes buck-passing to the management and hence limits the scope of its agency. The discursive patterns employed draw on the organizational context in which the program group operates. With this qualitative study we complement earlier work on program management through deepening the understanding of context by viewing it as a product of social construction.
© 2016 Elsevier Ltd, APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Organizational change programs, often managed by temporary organizational constructs (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995), are considered as being deeply embedded in their immediate organizational context (Lehtonen and Martinsuo, 2009; Johansson et al., 2007; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995), and thus the contextual influence has been noted as particularly relevant from the perspective of their management (Pellegrinelli et al., 2007). By programs, we refer to an ensemble of projects related to a common objective that contribute to the achievement of new systems and processes within an organization (Vereecke et al., 2003). Rather than having linear lifecycles and clearly fixed objectives, programs are emergent by nature and characterized by ambiguity (Pellegrinelli et al., 2007). The boundaries between the

program and the permanent organization are typically unclear and unstable, as the program personnel are often in a dual role, holding a full-time position in the permanent organization as well as working part-time in the program (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Lehtonen and Martinsuo, 2008). In addition, the practice of program management is in a close relationship with the context and significantly determined by it (Pellegrinelli et al., 2007). The contextual features of organizational change programs described above result in particularly interesting questions with respect to the influence of the context on the management of the program.

Previous research on program context has focused on understanding the linkages between the program and its environment. Activities taking place within the interface between the parent organization and the temporary organization (i.e., the project or program organization in charge of managing the change) have been of particular interest to scholars (Bakker, 2010; Lehtonen and Martinsuo, 2008, 2009; Pellegrinelli et al., 2007). It has been found that the relationship between the temporary program organization and permanent organization influences the temporary organization's performance (Johansson

---

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: jaana.nasanen@aalto.fi (J. Näsänen),
outi.vanharanta@aalto.fi (O. Vanharanta).
  [1] The authors contributed equally.

et al., 2007; Lehtonen and Martinsuo, 2009; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995) and that the forms of integration between the temporary organization and the parent organization vary throughout the lifecycle of the temporary organization (Johansson et al., 2007; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). In their retrospective study of an organizational development program, Lehtonen and Martinsuo (2008) identified practices and activities that managers employ to integrate and isolate the program from its parent organization, including different ways to capitalize on the parent organization's resources, use its structures, and legitimize the program within the parent organization. Thus, the relationship between these organizations is primarily described through the activities that take place at the interface. By comparing the program management practices employed in programs from different contexts, Pellegrinelli et al. (2007) found that although the same program management guidelines were followed, they were adapted very differently in different contexts. Johansson et al. (2007) and Lehtonen and Martinsuo (2008) also noted that the way in which the program management perceives the environment influences the activities and practices employed by them. However, the previous literature has not explored the process through which these perceptions of the context are generated, i.e., *how* members of the program management *themselves* make sense of the context during the emergent and ambiguous process. This is important as the way in which the context is perceived by the advocates of the program defines the way in which the program is managed on a daily basis.

In this paper, we explore how the members of a temporary program management group (hereafter referred to as the program group) negotiate the scope of its activities through constructing a shared understanding of its operational context, i.e., how they exercise their agency.[2] Agency refers to the program group's capability to produce and alter the context in which it operates and adjust its activities to the context (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Thus, we argue that the context in which the program group operates is not static, but rather a product of continuous negotiation through which a shared understanding of the context is constructed by the actors involved. In other words, the context is a product of the social processes and interactions in which the organizational actors are continuously engaged with each other (Boden, 1994; Silverman, 1970). We position our study in the so-called project as practice literature (Blomquist et al., 2010), which means that we explore the "internal life of processes" (Brown and Duguid, 2001) and move beyond understanding project models and their application to understanding the actors and activities through which they are performed. We build on the premises of social constructionism, which views the social reality

as constructed through talk and text, that is, through social interaction (e.g., Burr, 1995). This approach helps us move beyond descriptive accounts of the everyday work of those influencing program management to analyzing the discursive and reciprocal processes of agency formation, thus shedding light on the questions of *how and why program management groups end up doing what they do.*

Setting up temporary organizations is usually motivated by a need to perform specific tasks within a predefined time frame and to allocate specific resources for this purpose (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). The temporary organization under investigation in this study is a change program group whose *raison d'être* is to plan and implement an organization-wide spatial change that includes changes in the physical and virtual work environments, as well as a new modus operandi. This setting is particularly fruitful for studying the formation of the context and agency of a program group, as an organization-wide spatial change affects every member of the organization, including the advocates of the change themselves, and thus the program can be considered as deeply embedded in the parent organization. The focus of our analysis is on the discussion in meetings of the program group. We argue that the spoken interaction in program group meetings not only mirrors but also produces the group's capacity to contribute to transformation. Additionally, the focus on recorded conduct cuts across a basic problem associated with the gap between what people say and what they do (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

With this study we complement the earlier work on program management through deepening understanding of the meaning of context by illustrating the process through which the program group constructs a particular agency in its context through talk. Also, as the previous studies have used retrospective interview data for identifying the boundary-spanning activities (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Druskat and Wheeler, 2003; Lehtonen and Martinsuo, 2008), our study uses real-time naturally occurring data, which allows us to have a deeper look into the everyday work of program management. Our findings also complement the existing work on agency in organizational change through analyzing the interconnectedness of the construction of contextual understanding and agency and by bringing the dimension of temporality to the analysis.

We begin by reviewing the relevant literature concerning agency in the context of organizational change and after this, we elaborate on the conceptualization of temporal agency construction of Emirbayer and Mische (1998). This will be followed by a presentation of the methodology and empirical findings. In the conclusion we discuss the key insights of the study for a broader understanding of the relationship between context and program group agency.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Agency in change

Organizational change is an emergent, unpredictable, and highly contextual process (e.g., Pettigrew, 1985; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Various empirical studies have found that strategies

---

[2] To avoid confusion, we wish to highlight that our approach is not related to the construction of agency relationship in the economic agency theory (Ross, 1973), which is also an established discussion in the project management literature (Müller and Turner, 2005). In the context of project management, the delegation of tasks results in a principal-agent relationship between the project owner and manager, where the principal (project owner) depends on the agent (contractor or project manager) to undertake a task on the principal's behalf (Müller and Turner, 2005; Eisenhardt, 1989). The principal-agent theory focuses on discussing the characteristics of this relationship.