

The 'slippery' concept of 'culture' in projects: towards alternative theoretical possibilities embedded in project practice

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Abstract

This paper is conceptual in nature. It begins with a critique of the slippery use of the concept of culture in organisation studies and management practice and aims to illuminate problems with mainstream approaches to managing cultural differences and designing corporate culture as a panacea to organisational diversity, lack of intra-organisational cooperation or employee resistance. By contrasting the 'culture as a variable' approach with an understanding of culture as social-relational practice, as a meaning-making process, the paper expounds the importance of taking into account the fluidity of cultural categories, and the context-dependent and history-dependent nature of self-identification and self-consciousness in the attempts to improve performance and collaboration. The paper draws on a position known as process organisation studies from which projects are ontologically understood as social settings in a permanent state of creation, evolution and emergence through complex processes of relating between interdependent members. Cultural management, as a form of control technology, is then challenged by illuminating the inevitable, on-going shifting identity positioning of individuals through symbolic, conversational and power relating in organisations. The products of these relational processes are never fully predictable over time and across space. Specific methodological approaches for addressing the questions of how we get to know culture and how we study culture as practised in project organisations are the suggested and discussed. These include social constructionist perspectives, qualitative methods and interpretative accounts from, for example, ethnography, in unravelling the dynamics of, for example, identity (re-)constructions. The role and skills of meaning-makers as opposed to cultural designers and managers are discussed. The paper concludes with some provocations around emerging ethical considerations, ultimately questioning whether project culture is manageable, consensual and could be manipulated.

Keywords: project culture, cultural management, social constructionism, project identity, anthropology of organisations

1. Introduction

There are two main reasons for our interest in the notion of 'culture'. One is our own background as reflective practitioners with substantial international experience in working with and as, engineers, anthropologists and academic researchers mostly in project-based settings. The other, not unrelated, is our discomfort with how 'culture' has been appropriated by a widely promoted managerialist approach to organisational culture research which has, since the 1980s, become mainstream (Parker, 2000)¹. The mainstream organisational culture studies draw on a tradition known as instrumental-functional or positivistic (see also Fellows and Liu, 2013; Ogbonna and Harris, 1998). It sees culture as a variable, as a given, and, typically, generates prescriptions aimed at practitioners about: 1) how to recognise, differentiate among, and read into, culture of organisational members and/or the culture of their organisations; 2) how to, on that basis, predict organisations' and organisational members' values, expectations and responses in the work environment, and 3) how to consequently, control these through various 'managing cultural differences' technologies (Barley and Kunda, 1992) which include attempts to create culture by design through cultural change initiatives. At the individual level, this would mean that culture could be analysed, designed and influenced as well as 'read' by attempting to predict individuals' values or behaviour from cultural data without allowing for paradox (Williamson, 2002). To

¹ In the 1980s, research on culture followed two tendencies: one was focusing on so called "national culture" of organisational members and how this affects their working practices (Hofstede, 1980) and the other on the "organisational culture" of organisations and how this affects their market relations, change, strategy, etc. (Deal and Kennedy (1982). However, this research did not at the time necessarily suggest the possibility of using these approaches as ways of predicting behaviors (although the word "consequences" in the work of Hofstede could imply this). The idea to use culture to predict how people and organisations behave rapidly gained popularity largely through literature written by management 'gurus' (Peters and Waterman, 1982) as part of what some researchers have defined as the emergence of "Corporate Culturalism" (Willmott, 1993) and of the idea that Corporate Culture is a panacea for lack of unity in work values and intentions (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991).

talk about cultural differences is to believe that culture can be categorised and then assigned to individuals or groups, with both differences and similarities being visible and justifiable. At the organisational level, the assumption is that it should be possible to create a set of norms accommodated in the notion of organisational culture, which would both regulate and capitalise on those differences. The claim is that appropriately designed and maintained culture ties people and organisations together and gives meaning and purpose to their day-to-day lives (see Deal and Kennedy, 1982, among others). This implies that, for example, by insisting on certain practices, managers can create organisational values by a routinized ritualization (Bloch, 2005) and by making them accessible to all employees with the intention to establish cohesion and uniformity. An example of this approach is captured by an expectation that a “manager implicitly communicates key values and inculcates them in employees via day to day actions” (Deal and Kennedy, 1982, p.168). In an important way, it also raises management to the level of an ‘elite’, in other words a select few who have been entrusted with the task of defining the values of others.

The questions we are interested in, and wish to critically explore in this paper, are:

- (1) How is ‘culture’ expressed or put in practice so that it becomes evident to an observer (manager, researcher, employee)?
- (2) Is there a problem with how cultural attributions are conceived of and cultural belongings assigned to individuals, groups or projects?
- (3) What kind of difference makes a (cultural) difference?
- (4) Who deems the suggested classifications credible? And, for what purpose? Can it be left to managers alone?

It is opportune at this junction to explain the perspective we take towards the work arrangements labelled ‘project’. Our position is known, broadly, as relational processual studies of organising, where a project is ontologically understood not as an objectively existing ubiquitous phenomenon, but as an emergent outcome of historical, disparate and

ambiguous political processes evolving and changing in an unpredictable way over time through symbolic and power-based inter-subjective relating (Stacey, 2001; Chia, 2002; Cicmil and Marshall, 2005; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2009). It encourages us to think of a project as a language and as a practice where a project's language game 'consists of a vocabulary and a set of language rules that are developed and modified in the course of ongoing social practice' (Linehan and Kavanagh, 2006, p.56). Projects are seen as social settings embedded in a specific context, with a complex interplay between the structure governing the project (e.g. the contract) and the agency (e.g. interests and aspirations of groups and individuals, their social interaction and every-day power relating). The core principles of a processual ontology imply that projects are sites of continuously evolving human action. The experience of being together – that is, accomplishing together a sophisticated, collaborative project activity is essentially a temporal process of human relating in which the project team members continually review their futures by actions in the present. Team-coherency, synergy and co-operation are directly influenced by, to paraphrase Heidegger (1962), the pace and extent to which the project mandate is absorbed into the background as a phenomenal domain and provides affordances for project participants to collaboratively construct a negotiated and shared project reality in their specific context of the living present. Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus is one of the frameworks that addresses the agency-structure problem in contemporary social theory, pioneering the idea that structures reproduce, and function as constraints simultaneously with actors creating these structures, calculating interests and pursuing distinction (Swartz, 1997), as we will see below.

The paper unfolds as follows: we elaborate further on our proposition that the appropriation and use of the concept of culture by some management researchers and practitioners is 'slippery'. We do that by drawing on a selected palette of theoretical debates around definitions and constructs of culture, on how flexible or fixed cultural belongings of individuals are considered to be, how cultural classifications and their attributions to self and

others are performed in organisational daily life and how cultural management is practised and the ethical concerns emanating from it. Parker's (2000) critical work on cultures and identity has provided us with a needed conceptual grounding for a deeper probing of these issues. It is also a rich reference text for the reader interested in methodological and theoretical issues in organisational culture studies. We, then, look at how these insights may be relevant for the studies of culture as practice(d) in project-based organisational settings where projects are understood as complex and becoming, as conscious and unconscious processes of conversational, symbolic and power relating. Subsequently, we evaluate methodological approaches to studying cultural issues in projects from a social constructivist perspective. For us, this means being aware of and explicit about, ontological and epistemological complexities around research practice and facing inherent intellectual challenges in relation to the claims about whether and how we can get to know culture, our own and that of others.

2. The slippery use of the concept of culture

Culture is a most complex and abstract concept. Its meaning is intriguing to analyse as it moves across various possibilities to denote the state of human and non-human nature: to *be* or not to be *cultured* in relation to education and ability to appreciate art; to *have* or *be* a distinct culture meaning as in to have a tradition in art, history, literature that is enduring, respected, well known (Egypt, China; Byzantium; Inca); to *be* or *become cultivated* (agricultural land). The concept 'culture' was first used by anthropologists at the beginning of the 20th Century with reference to the practices of humans to create understanding of the social and use it to express ethnic identity symbolically without relating to biological or genetic links. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) uncovered the polysemy² of the word by

² “polysemy” refers to the uses of the same word with different meanings: the significance of the word changes depending on the interpretations and context.

identifying more than 100 definitions and understandings of culture. Smircich (1983) noted that the concept of culture used in management had its origins in anthropology and has been uncritically borrowed by other disciplines, including organisational studies, to represent or signify something other than its original meaning. In that respect, ‘culture’ has become a metonym³. Parker (2000) provides a good overview of the original conceptualisations of culture and the tendencies by management researchers and gurus to appropriate some of these meanings in order to explain or promote certain ways of understanding and overcoming the diversity challenge with which everyday organisational life has confronted the management science prescriptions. With reference to the set of questions outlined in the introduction, this section argues for an understanding of culture as social relational practice. At the same time it illuminates problems which the slippery appropriation of the notion of ‘culture’ poses for research and practice.

Understanding culture as social practice: focusing on negotiated and shifting identities in context

Bourdieu (1977, 1993) conceptualised culture as practices following common master patterns that range over cognitive, corporeal, as well as attitudinal dimensions of action. The central question for Bourdieu is the notion of collective existence, which is ‘how groups pursue strategies to produce and reproduce the conditions of their collective existence and how culture is constitutive of this reproductive process’ (Swartz, 1997, p.7). This process is a combination of conflict, competition and cooperation among actors in the structured arenas of games and battles (fields) for acquiring forms of socially scarce goods and values (economic, cultural and symbolic capital) which are operative, advantageous or recognised in that specific context (field) and are affecting actors’ position in relation to other players in the community. As such, this dynamics can be understood as a social practice which also changes the structure of the local social setting as it goes on, but is simultaneously

³ “metonym” is a word with one original meaning but used subsequently to refer to something else seen as connected to it, by association.

constrained by the always existing, obligatory regulations, boundaries and patterns of the setting as the experiential context. The relationship of culture to power stands at the centre of Bourdieu's intellectual project. Bourdieu proposes a structural theory of practice that connects action to culture, structure and power.

From this perspective, culture like any other aspect of organising and organisation, cannot be understood if its power-politics dimension is ignored. As Yanow (2007) argues, this is because 'both organisation and its organising are marked by politics and power, including the power of ideas but also of structures that foster and hinder their articulation' (Yanow, 2007, p. 174). In contrast to the instrumental cultural management prescriptions which recommend imposing a set of carefully thought out rules, norms and behaviours (culture by design, as outlined in the introduction) on everyday working practices of organisational members, we expound here an understanding of culture as a social practice, as a meaning-making process not reducible to institutional structures, artefacts and rhetorical categorisations only. It refocuses attention on the significance of power relations and structural forms governing organisational life and performance (see also Ogbonna and Harris, 1998). Assigning culture to individuals and groups and, for that matter, talking about organisational culture cannot be a value-free, objective exercise. Classifications used for enforcing cultural differences are not merely neutral devices – they are always tied to forms of action or intention; therefore they may shift depending on who is involved in the conversation, when, where and for what reason. Culture is constructed through meaning making processes, which are, according to Brannen and Salk (2000) historically situated and emergent, shifting and incomplete meanings and practices generated in webs of agency and power. This clearly problematises more managerialist, instrumental understandings of culture (as a variable) and indicates that the concept of 'identity' may provide alternative and practically relevant lines of inquiry in researching organisational and professional culture.

The concept of 'identity', argued by Parker (2000) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), among others, to be intrinsically related to the practice of culture and culture management, is

conceptualized as constitutive of multiple discursive and socially-constructed themes, far from essentialist and functionalist perspectives on organisations and management. The argument is that any cultural category (such as ‘academic’, ‘engineer’, ‘modern’, ‘European’), gets displaced or dislocated over time, and remains ‘overflowed by a plurality of meanings which prevent its being fixed as full positivity’ (Willmott, 2006, p.13). It is important to discuss how individuals understand the world and the meaning of their subjective life at a particular place and point in time. Nietzsche argues that an individual’s interpretation of his or herself and of the world is always changing; many impulses and forces with their own genealogies are involved in the fluctuation of events, mental states, individual psychology and the behaviour of societies (Geuss, 1994:76). Organisational and social identities remain fully entwined with and embedded in each other in the process of individual identity formation or ‘identity work’ with people being constantly ‘engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their personal constructions or narratives’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p.1165) in making sense of organisational reality. Social constructionism advocates that identity formation is a right, not a compulsory obligation or responsibility. Each individual is entitled to freely define and redefine, construct and reconstruct her/his identity in terms of gender, class, religion, organisation, profession, nation, etc. at any time. People are also entitled to be free from being identified with anything or anybody at all, if they so wish. However, for Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley and Littlejohns, ‘identity is never autonomous, but fundamentally relational in character’ (Sturdy et al, 2006, p. 854) because all human processes (including the psychological ones) are mediated by our knowledge and consciousness of ourselves as cultural, historical beings, not only as ‘natural’ beings. According to Kosmala and Herrbach (2006), individual identity is the right and ‘*the responsibility of each individual to reflect upon how they choose to exist in a historically and culturally specific time*’ (p. 1395). This evolves into a perpetual movement, and often a struggle, of identity around creating a sense of self and providing temporal or fluid answers to the question *who am I?* and *what do I stand for?* (Sturdy et al, 2006; Albert et al, 2000). For Knights and Willmott, (1999)

‘identity is, in this sense, always changing despite our best endeavours to render it stable and secure.’ (p.163)

Social constructionists argue that there is an intrinsic relationship between cultural categorisations, power and social action. Cultural belonging is a process of sense-making (of a shared reality) and identity construction, in a historical, social, political and structural context where (in)security and (in)equality of organisational members are, in turn, reproduced through their actions (Knights and Willmott, 1999). Organisations are considered politicized arenas, where an understanding of collective identities is multi-voiced and plurivocal (Willmott, 2006). An engaging empirical illustration of this can be found in the study of an organisational change initiative seen as cultural change, by Ogbonna and Harris (1998). The experience of their daily existence and reality itself by involved actors implies both ontological and epistemological questions. Heidegger (1962) demonstrated that cultural knowledge is the result of an on-going interpretation and meaning-making that emerges from the capacities of understanding, which are rooted in human biological embodiment and are lived and experienced in a shared cultural context (Heidegger’s fundamental ontology). The process of interpretation and meaning-making is particularly needed when the actors feel that their coping in the world through daily practices which they have been socialised into, is in question.

Is culture manageable and consensual?- Some critical remarks on the concept of ‘organisational culture management’

Referring to Wright and Noe’s (1996) work, Dulaimi and Hariz (2011) have pointed out in a paper published in this journal that by the late 1990s, the uses of organisational culture management and organisational behaviour techniques to harmonize cultural differences had become particularly popular and recognised. In contrast, we invoke Martin Parker’s (2000) work, which questions the possibility of managing culture in the sense of creating an enduring set of shared beliefs in organisational social settings. Parker suggests that culture in

organisations is certainly managed as a temptation to use power to stabilize culture and identity, but not necessarily 'manageable' in the neat sense proposed by the culturalist management gurus, because 'the outcomes of this intervention can never be totally controlled' (2000, p.230). As discussed above, culture as organisational practice is understood as fluid and contingent on context, as history-dependent, as identity and shifting positions, and as negotiated products of language, discourses and rhetoric; it is always related to the questions of citizenship (in a global world) and individuality in a wider context. It should, according to Parker (2000), be seen as 'a process of making 'us' and 'them' claims that is permeated by assumptions within the wider society but also entirely unique because of the historically located nature of organisational identifications' (p.5). Therefore, culture management is a managerial *attempt* at intervention through putting in place institutional structures, systems, and artefacts as disciplining mechanisms to align values, beliefs and behaviours of organisational members with a desired form of cultural identification. Referring to or attempting to manage organisational culture and identity is one of the control technologies which powerful groups deploy consciously in their strive for full organisational control. At the end of the 1990s, the idea that a culturally unified workforce increases productivity was popular among organisations. There was also institutional research that recommended managing cultural diversity through specific human resource training programmes (Miller and Rowney, 1999). However, in practice, they have not always resulted in the desired outcome (see also Ogbonna and Harris, 1998).

Knights and Willmott (1999) discussed cultural categorisations and stereotyping as a strategy of inequality. They argue that everyone, advantaged and disadvantaged alike, do it because of uncertainty and insecurity about the quality and value of one's own behaviour, lifestyle, reality or identity. Cultural stereotyping is achieved by ascribing fixed and unchanging characteristics to the other (individual or group) 'so as to reduce their particularity to a cartoon-like quality' (Knights and Willmott, 1999, p.109). From this

perspective of symbolic interactionism (essentially, existentialist), power and freedom are inseparable, and inextricably bound:

'power is a relation in which the actions of some people have an effect on the actions of others. The possession of material resources or access to specific knowledge... may facilitate the exercise of power, but only if those over whom power is exercised are tempted by the material rewards offered or have considerable respect for the knowledge surrounding the exercise of power (Knights and Willmott, 1999, p.166).

Moreover, if the culture is understood as a process of making claims about difference and similarity between persons in an organisation, that is, differentiation between 'us' and 'them', it also implies that powerful groups within organisations have more control over the associated meaning making-processes than those with positions of lesser power and influence. These differences and similarities are not fixed or objectively existing out there but are only made meaningful through cultural claims.

To define, introduce and manipulate organisational culture is still considered one of the responsibilities of a managerial elite. Empirical studies of managerial elites suggest that control and supervision of organisational culture is a practice associated with the board of directors duties (Nicholson and Newton, 2010). It has also become a small internal consulting industry that translates global concerns, ideas and messages into daily activities of the employees (Ogbonna and Harris, 1998; Fellows and Liu, 2013). According to Fellows and Liu, (2013, p.412):

'Usually, organizational cultures are initiated by the founders of the organization and are amended by others who have had major impact on the organization's development. Such people, through influence over employment of staff, shape the values and behaviour of members of the organization to develop the organization's identity—both internally and externally'

However, individuals may voluntarily accept or consent to buying into the institutional culture norms and rituals if they see an advantage in entrusting the elite with defining the appropriate values. This 'buying into', in turn, becomes not only an accomplishment but a constraint, as it prevents internal resistance or questioning. Organisational anthropologists have explained how this manipulation works through observation and analysis of the internal reactions to specific culture interventions from managerial elites. In his ethnography of an industrial multinational conglomerate, Gaggiotti (2010) analyzes contradictions, similarities and differences between official corporate chronicles and individual stories of international managers. Gaggiotti describes how employees of the company not only resisted patronization by, alternatively, agreeing and disagreeing with the company "official" culture, epitomised in the official corporate chronicles. He also shows how they were able to construct an unofficial organisational chronicle, different to the official one. In his ethnography of a high tech corporation, Kunda (2006) describes a room in a corner of a building prepared for the daily two-hour-delivery of a module on "Culture Model" and the emerging unexpected reaction of the employees to this permanent internal bombarding and indoctrination.

Both Gaggiotti and Kunda join Ogbonna and Harris (1998) in suggesting that the perception of the employees was that organisational culture was introduced and managed in order to indoctrinate, acculturate and, ultimately, extract non-paid work. This resonates with Parker's (2000) assertion that the purpose of managing by culture is to legitimise certain actions and beliefs but not others. Corinne Maier (2005) has explained how organisations used the idea of culture to create artificial one-way only loyalty (from the employees to the company, but never from the company to the employees) and how the concept of culture is appealing to global corporations to signify that job is a privilege and that management always work towards the best interests of the company and their employees. Alvesson and Willmot

(2002) see such attempts to regulate an individual's identity through organisational culture management as a form of discipline:

a precarious and often contested process involving active identity work, as is evident in efforts to introduce new discursive practices of "teamwork", "partnership", etc. Organisational members are not reducible to passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities' (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 621).

Ultimately, 'culture management' implies the process of culture making (the design of desired culture and associated change leading to employees' buy-in) involving 'changes in identity, relations of struggle and dependence, including the experience of reality itself... in situations wherein groups and classes struggle to produce and interpret culture within the industrializing milieu' (Ong 1987: 2-3). It raises the concern about the potential for the 'government of the soul' and also invokes an ethical consideration of 'what kind of attempts at the manipulation of beliefs in the organisational context are justifiable' (Parker, 2000, p.226)?

Four ideas from this section are of significance for our argument. Firstly, the fluidity of identity in organisations is a result of a complex interplay between national, organisational and individual notions of identity and reflects the experiences of freedom, insecurity, inequality and power in the context. As culture is intrinsically linked with identity, people permanently redefine their culture too. This problematises the notion of culture as a predictive variable, as a given. Secondly, it is problematic and unhelpful to view individuals as 'cultural dopes' (term coined by Williamson, 2002), as passive receivers of cultural attributions made by others on their behalf. Thirdly, cultural management in organisations is a problematic control mechanism as the outcomes of the creation of organisational culture remain unpredictable due to the emergent nature of identity work explained earlier. Fourthly,

how, if at all, could we (researchers, managers, organisational members) come to know about and reflect on culture – our own and that of others?

We explore these below in our critical reflection on the notion of project culture and on methodologies for researching cultural issues in project organisations.

3. Why are projects interesting settings for studying culture and creating culture-related knowledge?

Over the last three decades, projects have become a dominant form of work in organisations across a variety of sectors. Moreover, they seem to also be a favoured way of thinking about and representing ambitions, adventure, controlled implementation of novel ideas and personal aspirations in other spheres of life, justifying ways of working and living as well as articulating the character of successful and effective social interaction. The process through which this new way of framing organisational spaces has been constructed and reproduced is termed in critical management circles as ‘projectification’ of organisations (Midler 1995; Cicmil, Hodgson, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009; Paton, Hodgson, and Cicmil, 2010). However, life with projects has evidently not been as neat and simple as some of the definitions of projects and project management may imply. Vulnerability of project-based working as a complex process of multi-agency interaction, in an environment characterised by micro-diversity, unpredictability and differing perceptions of risk, is reflected in a widespread tendency of projects to fail (cf Morris and Hough, 1987; Flyvbjerg et al, 2003) – a trauma in a success-focused field. The very characteristics of a project - a unique temporary unit, multi-functional multidisciplinary teams, customer focus, strategic orientation, a disciplined approach to time-management, cost and quality - that promote it as an ideal template for work design simultaneously present the major obstacles to information exchange, knowledge sharing and collaborative accomplishment of tasks (Greiner and

Schein, 1981; Packendorff, 1995; Kreiner, 1995; Marshall, 2001; Sydow and Staber, 2002; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2009).

A legitimate project management task is to organise project work in such a way that it can be coordinated and controlled. This includes creating an atmosphere conducive to co-operation where, ideally, the relationships among interdependent individuals and groups are based on mutual understanding, transparency, no-blame attitudes and willingness to share information. Not surprisingly, the problems with project performance are easily attributed to cultural clashes and a lack of appropriate and healthy project culture. Cultural management based solutions may be seen as rather attractive and necessary. The argument for designing and having an “appropriate” project culture is driven by the need to enable and ensure collaboration among multiple and diverse project participants under conditions of uncertainty, which are always present in project settings and to ensure control so that the project delivers as planned. Making cultural claims for the previously explained ‘us’ and ‘them’ division among project participants will then serve as the argument for a need for reconciliation among them through creating a project culture. In practice, this means, according to Orr (1996), to create ‘highly skilled improvisation’ (p.1) to work on something, with no necessary dependency on previous participants relations. Orr has observed that in that process, particular language and narrative is negotiated and jargon developed for the project, including acronyms, sense of humour, ways of organising agreement and disagreement, stories of the project, chronologies, rhetorics and similar. Orr has also noted the production and adoption of specific institutional artefacts, such as workflows, technology, equipment, communication tools, reports, and particular rituals: times of arriving, leaving, sitting around tables (places), deadlines and ways of organising meetings, as aspects of project culture creation.

The process of designing and implementing an appropriate project culture in practice often turns out to be non-cohesive, non-unified and always under negotiation, as project settings, like ethnic groups, already have specific cultural practices. Several reasons for the

ineffectiveness of the process can be identified. To start with, accounting for cultural identity in projects is hugely complex. There are multiple possibilities for differentiation and for making and assigning categories. If culture is always performed locally, then on projects it is possible that some localities are more connected than others. The making of 'us' and 'them' claims in projects is a product of on-going power relations. Distinctive experience of power-fuelled politics can also be observed, in the continuous reinforcing of distinctions about who is who on the project (the leader, the followers, the "us" and the "them"). This includes some particular myths negotiated for the project about the client, the champion, the glory or significance, celebrations, commemorations, or mourning- (see also Clegg et al, 2006). Powerful groups within the project organisation tend to have more control over the associated meaning-making processes than those with positions of lesser power and influence. Reflecting on Parker's (2000) argument of 'fragmented unities' it is of importance to understand at what point the 'us' and 'them' divide becomes 'we' to constitute a boundary for project culture.

For us, projects are **sites** where project members engage in and experience specific practices, in webs of agency and power, conducive to multiple identity formation, dynamics and genealogies over time. Bourdieu's (1985) notion of collective existence is of relevance here, as groups of project participants pursue strategies to produce and reproduce the conditions of their collective existence with culture being constitutive of this reproductive process. It is reasonable to say that project culture is closely interwoven with project making. The question becomes: who can be held responsible for such a complex task and how?

One possible answer could be found by exploring how professional culture is practised in project settings. There are studies that suggest that engineer culture promotes individualistic behaviour and reluctance to work in teams (Tang, 2000; Ingram and Parker, 2002). Kunda has suggested that practices in engineering are constructed and reproduced because of the particular professional culture of the engineers (Kunda, 2006). The way engineers engage with technology has been considered a distinctive element of engineer culture. Feldman

(1989) has studied the affection engineers have for technology and suggested that the reason for this is that developing or performing technological expertise is at the centre of the engineering ethos and is a source of authority and power among engineers. Nevertheless, even in engineering projects, seen as arenas of practice, engineering culture cannot be assumed as dominant and as being the only category to which a project engineer could be assigned to. Micro-diversity in project settings is pronounced and related to multiple categories simultaneously: (functional, professional, organisational, national, trade-related, generational, geo-regional, etc). Distinctiveness is created, not given by a particular professional background or expertise, but as a product of interaction, negotiations and the change of power relations if we take a processual view on projects, explained in the introduction. Whose culture are we taking into consideration when contemplating the culture of a project? That of the 'elite' (members of high status groups such as managers, professionals / specialist experts, main contractors, powerful stakeholders) or of the 'lower status' or weaker groups whose capacity to influence project decisions is limited due to the way risks are transferred or contracts drawn?

In addition to the conceptual debate about models and levels of analysis in project culture research, recently started by Fellows and Liu (2013), it is helpful to discuss the concept of identity in project environments as we need to appreciate pluralism and tensions in project organisations and acquire a deeper understanding of how power simultaneously constitutes and constrains social actions in project settings, including those seen as fundamental to cultural belonging, categorisation and perception. As they interact with other project members, individuals constantly navigate through the nested levels of identity constructions, weaving together potentially incommensurate positions. The concept of identity in project environments is particularly important as it 'draws attention to the importance of our distinctive self-consciousness in producing, understanding, and transforming the social and natural world' (Knights and Willmott, 1999, p.163). Neither a culture nor a project is a cohesive and stable whole but a fractured unity – they are disparate collections of accounts,

people, technologies and symbols which are deployed in different ways, by different people, at different times. A critical strand in organisational culture literature suggests 'that organisational culture should be seen as a 'fragmented unity' in which members identify themselves as collective at some times and divided at others' (Parker, 2000). As discussed above, culture - of a project, organisation and nation alike - can be defined as the politics of experiencing reality and changes in identity (Brannen and Salk, 2000). This again explains the primacy and pervasiveness of politics and its connection with experience of reality by the actors involved in their joint practice and hence in the identity-enactment of them as project workers or managers, as an on-going and living phenomenon.

The fluidity of identity in project settings, a complex interplay between national, organisational and individual notions of identity can be linked to freedom, insecurity, inequality and power (Knights and Willmott, 1999) that simultaneously form and are being formed in the interaction of project participants. The way people interpret themselves and the project itself is prone to change. It is never fixed and unfolds with the becoming of the project over time. Meaning making is itself a complex relational process emerging in the medium of conversations, symbols and power relating under uncertainty – that is, joint action, one of the defining principles of project based work. It changes the structure of the local social setting as it goes on, but is simultaneously constrained by the always existing, obligatory regulations, boundaries and patterns of the project setting as the experiential context.

4. Some methodological suggestions for studying culture and creating culture-related knowledge in project organisations

Our point of departure has been that organisations and, for that matter, projects are processes of on-going construction in a temporal and spatial sense that draw together history, context and everyday practice and are not simply structured mini-societies with a predetermined and

predictable ways of working, behaving and achieving. The sense which members make of their project organisation and which we, researchers, make of it 'is therefore bounded by the context of understood power relations – between men and women, the old and the young, managers and workers, professionals and administrators and so on' (Parker, 2000, p.226). We note that projects may be framed as ecologies of multiple social worlds, which offer fertile opportunities for exploring how the meanings of 'culture' are produced and reproduced. However, we warn of methodological challenges associated with studying culture-related constructs, the nature of knowledge created and its usefulness in participating on and managing projects.

The fundamental ontology in constructivism is that 'each person categorises their experience and in doing so creates their own subjective reality shared with other through language' (Schumacher 1997, p.110). This suggests that culture must be continually built through communication that renegotiates the similarities and differences and the interpretation of shared experience (Schumacher, 1997). For Sackmann (1997), the discovery of cultural knowledge is associated with the perceived role of research. In her view, 'the role of research here is to discover the shared cultural knowledge, both explicit and implicit, that reflects the way members of a cultural knowledge are inferred from the doing and saying' (p.26). Hence, the researcher's main concern should be the inference from the saying and doing of the research subject. Czarniawska (2004) described this problem as the 'problem of intentionality of human action' (p.7) which can be resolved through a narrative mode of knowing. Similarly, for Mir and Watson, social constructivists are anti-essentialist and believe that realities are products of different contexts, perspectives and sense-making processes (Mir and Watson 2000).

Bourdieu (1977) argues that theory and empirical research must proceed simultaneously on micro and macro levels of analysis and within both objective and subjective methodological traditions, focusing on action which is habituated, practical, tacit, dispositional, and at the same time structured. Research into project culture must also attempt to transcend the narrow

perspective that treats project organisation as isolated from the wider cultural, economic, political and social patterns characterising globalised society. The cultural anthropologist Ulf Hannerz has developed a research methodology, 'multi-sited research', to study the connections of the local culture and the global culture (Hannerz, 1996). The study of project culture could benefit from multi-sited research approach. Projects are sometimes multi-sited cultural arenas where members develop connections between project culture and other cultures they construct.

The choice of research methodology is crucial; not only in terms of its adequacy and accuracy, but also in terms of its impact on the research process itself. The methodological approach defines and redefines the researcher and researcher's identity at the same time in the given field for research action as much as the research question does, a concept extensively developed by Bourdieu (1993). Parker (2000) reminds us of the importance to reflect on who and where (outside or within the project) is the analyst in the process of identification of a 'culture'? Organisational anthropologists claim that the only way to try to understand how culture is constructed is if the analyst is inside the organisation, observing and co-experiencing the practices (Van Maanen, 1988; Orr, 1996; Barley, 2005). Technically, this approach implies an ethnographic-based methodology of collecting data. Qualitative methods such as ethnography have proved to be useful in unravelling the dynamics of identity (re-)constructions. In his ethnographic work at Xerox, Orr (1996) claimed that the context from which the sense-making of the professional practice is created has to be found by observing the work itself. We found inspiration in Orr to suggest that project culture should be studied by analysing how work is done in concrete settings, intentionally constructed as projects. This is a way of overcoming the slippery use of 'culture' in research by researchers themselves, as well as staying true to the social-constructivist commitment in culture studies in contrast to positivist functionalist approaches to culture as a fixed, observable variable, and other challenges discussed earlier.

A possible methodological approach of knowing how culture operates in settings labelled as 'project' is to follow what the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1966) suggested as the *bricolage* analogy; observing how different actors engage with the tasks the project demands and create their own mythologies of what to do. Lévi-Strauss explained the analogy between mythical knowledge and engineer knowledge as two types of knowing and performing (culture) in a given situation:

the 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions (Lévi-Strauss, 1966 [1962], p. 17).

Methodologically, the study of project culture has to be focused on observing project work practices, what people involved in projects are doing and saying. This is a research imperative that emerged from cultural ethnographers' and anthropologists' experiences with fieldwork itself. The social anthropologist Janet Carsten suggested that people construct their culture not through philosophical debates about their lives but on 'discussing who was going to join a rice-harvesting party, the details of a forthcoming wedding feast and its finances, the distribution of some form of government loan, the price of fish and so on' (Carsten, 2007, p.29). Our position is that project members construct their project culture by working on the project, not by answering researchers' questions on what their culture is.

The researcher of project culture should be aware that he/she is responsible for his/her methodological choices and an observation-based methodology seems an appropriate one. Practising, for example, what is called “shadowing” and direct observations (Czarniawska, 2007) is likely to be the most suitable methodology to adopt for the study of culture as a meaning-making process. Kostera (2007) has also suggested ‘shadowing’ for the study of other organisational practices. We agree with her that it allows the researcher to be an accompanier of an organisational member and observe how she/he makes meaning of the culture in the given context (e.g. the project), without the researcher taking on an internal (project) role. The direct observations of the whole project settings allows the project ethnographer to notice and record how a particular cultural setting is being instigated and how project members are responding to it. The approach to conceptualizing the dialogue between theory and the ethnographic observations of project practices which we are proposing here is similar to other organizational researchers (Kostera, 2007; Schein, 2010; Czarniawska, 2007; Van Maanen, 1988). Our stance is that for the academic knowledge of project culture to be useful, it must illuminate the experience of being involved in projects and provide explanations for what we observe. As Schein has pointed out, if experience cannot be explained by what research and theorizing have shown so far, then the scholar/practitioner must develop his or her own concepts and, thereby, enhance existing theory (Schein, 1987, 2008). Experiencing project culture as a shadowing/observer ethnographer could help academic research to develop new or alternative theoretical approaches to understanding how project culture is constructed, which forces interact in its creation and under which conditions projects are experienced as spaces where culture(s) can emerge.

5. Concluding remarks on theory, practice and methodology to study project culture

Drawing on a selection of theoretical and philosophical conceptualisations and some extant empirical analyses, we have argued throughout this paper for the study of culture as context-dependent social relational practice. We have taken a stance on a project as a language and a practice, in line with a becoming ontology of process organisation studies. A summary of our argument follows.

The notion of cultural differences and instrumental cultural categorisations attributed to individuals and groups on the basis of the attributor's knowledge of their cultural backgrounds are unhelpful and in many cases problematic as a way of understanding and managing diversity in project organisations. The use of cultural attributions, in particular from management mainstream literature, is problematic and 'slippery' because of their classificatory nature, the attribution process and intended purpose. By emphasising the 'slippery' use of the concept of culture as appropriated in management practice, we question the possibility of examining culture in projects without understanding the politics of power that permeates cultural allegiances. We suggest that the attention should be refocused from the belief that the culture of an individual is detectable, fixed and indicative of their behaviour, towards an understanding of culture as a context-dependent practice which allows for the fluidity of identity and identity performance (contingent upon power relations, self-consciousness, institutional frameworks and a sense of security and equality in the given context) over time. From that perspective, people in project organisations can be members of many cultures at the same time because each of us has a palette of choices for classification of differences that construct our identity.

We suggested that cultural categorizations are not only unhelpful and problematic in project settings but also ethically questionable as they are made by the people involved in projects themselves. We have argued in this paper that the understanding of the interaction of both

high and low status groups participating on a project is needed in order to study the process of project culture formation. This process is about shared meaning making which enables joint action in the context where self-conscious individuals continuously evaluate and make judgements about their freedom, security, equality and power. We have shown some organisational anthropologists' observations of people's reactions to culture management (perceived as control and regulatory mechanism) and argued that managerial technologies intended to regulate and control collaboration and performance of organisational members and to harmonise their values through designing project culture based on such cultural categorising are not adequate. We should go above and beyond them by introducing interventions focused on meaning-making by those (not necessarily and only the perceived 'elite') who have skills, through their participation in everyday conversations and social and political practices within the project organisation, thus enabling common ground and shared reality to emerge.

In the preceding section we have advocated a methodological approach based on "shadowing" project members in their everyday practicing and narrating their project culture. We argue that studies of culture in organisations, and in project-based organisational settings, need to be enriched by allowing voices from a plurality of methodological and theoretical traditions to be heard. This particularly means respecting ontological and epistemological possibilities. Although these question and are often incommensurable with positivist normative aspirations of organisational management research, only by combining them can we provide a healthy debate about what and how we can know about culture and our human condition.

We agree with Parker (2000) that 'cultural management' in the sense of creating an enduring set of shared beliefs is impossible. Attempts of organisations through their managerial elites to define and manage the culture and the identity of others (citizens, workers, etc.) are not only in contradiction with the original conception of culture by anthropologists (the observation of the culture without intervention) but could also have ethical and moral

consequences. The possibility of controlling project performance through ‘managing cultural differences’ could be merely a product of managerial wishful thinking in a global world. With ‘projectification’ of work and life being a globally spread phenomenon and, in many ways, a consequence of the dominant economic and political order, we draw on Raelin’s (2011) assertion that contemporary capitalism could be moving towards the end of managerial control. We are told that we now live in a flexible, individualized but interconnected, interdependent and unpredictable environment of modern capitalism where organisations have to adopt a different strategy of managing and organising - fluid, flexible, ephemeral - in order to survive and thrive. This calls for an alternative, distributed and socialized mode of management and control where managers should be reflexive and involved facilitators of meaning-making and of the creation of a common ground for people to resort to in their everyday joint accomplishment of sophisticated project activities. In that case, traditional managerial control could be not only obsolete and unnecessary but inefficient and counterproductive too.

Our aim has been to provide alternative understandings of cultural differences and project culture and some recommendations for coping with diversity in project organisations. We hope to have made a contribution to the body of knowledge concerned with fairer, more responsible and accountable, and altogether more successful modes of managing projects.

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