

Love, hate and projects: On passion, obsession and depression in project-based work

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Abstract

Project work form is a conspicuous facet of modern work life that is becoming increasingly (and positively) reified through discursive processes of rationality, anti-bureaucratization and professionalization. While there is a growing body of empirical research subjecting the project form and individual experiences of project-based work to critical scrutiny from various theoretical positions, the notion of projects as objects of emotional labour has still not received any attention in the literature. At the same time, projects in practice are often constructed as ‘emotionalized zones’ through demands on involvement and commitment.

Based in these considerations, the aim of the paper is to analyze how projects are constructed as objects of emotions through everyday practices. This is done through analyzing narratives from individuals involved in project-based work, narratives extracted from an earlier study on individuals in projects. The individuals interviewed work in the cultural sector, in theatres and opera houses. The empirical section of the paper will be organized along the three concepts of passion, obsession and depression, describing how individuals conceive of their projects, identities and personal lives during project episodes. In the final analytical section of the paper, we then extract emotional themes in the narratives, themes related to identities, desires and aesthetics.

Keywords

Project work, emotional labour, objects of emotions, theatre organizations, critical analysis

1. Introduction

During the last decades, projects have become a common form of work organisation in all sectors of the economy. One reason for this development is that many products and services have become so customised and complex that their execution demands an unique sequence of actions, another that the increasing pace of change in society results in an abundance of change and development reforms in organisations (Ekstedt et al, 1999). An increasing number of firms become “project-based”, i.e. firms where almost all operations are organized as projects and where permanent structures fill the function of administrative support (cf Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Whitley, 2006).

The basic reason for this diffusion seems to be that the project – viewed as a task specific and time-limited form of working – is perceived as a controllable way of avoiding all the classic problems of bureaucracy with which most “normal” organisations are struggling (Packendorff, 1995; Hodgson, 2004). The project is seen as a promise of both controllability and adventure (Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm, 2002) and as a necessity when the complexities and uniquenesses of contemporary organizations are to be handled (Cicmil et al, 2009). In that sense, project-based work is a part of the wave of new ‘post-bureaucratic’ organisational forms that has entered most industries during the last decades (cf Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Gill, 2002; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006). In many industries and companies, the project is now the normal work form. This is obvious in cultural life, advertising, consulting, R&D, IT etc, but also in several large industrial corporations who executes numerous projects on a daily basis (Ekstedt et al, 1999). Given this trend, one might assess that work life for many people is becoming increasingly “projectified”, i.e. that substantial parts of peoples’ work lives is spent in projects and similar temporary forms of organising (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006).

1.1 Projects as objects of emotions

An important consideration in the study of project-based work is the clear tendency to ‘objectify’ or ‘reify’ projects in practice (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007). This is mainly due to the general developments within the Project Management area, promoting the project as a distinct work form, project managers as bearers of a specific knowledge base, and project management knowledge as a measurable and certifiable necessity for an emergent occupation. As an increasing number of corporations require these specific knowledge and certifications from their project managers, project work is in a rapid process of professionalization (Hodgson, 2007).

As noted by Hodgson & Cicmil (2007) and Segercrantz (2009), this development constitutes a reification of the project as an object to be managed, thereby establishing projects and the management of projects as homogenous, universal and distinct phenomena – despite the actual internal variety. This does not make project management a unique phenomenon as compared to other forms of management; it neither implies special practical tools or tricks, nor does it imply a special theoretical body clearly separated from general management theory. But it is still treated as a special sub-field, socially constructed as such through the general differentiation of project management from other managerial fields – not least through the very labelling of certain organizational processes as ‘projects’ and the intense efforts undertaken by associations such as IPMA and PMI to create a project management profession (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007; Cicmil et al, 2009).

As a practical and scholarly discourse, Project Management is a clear offspring of the modernist, technicist and rationalist views of management that came to characterize the social sciences after World War II (Packendorff, 1995, Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006, Cicmil et al, 2009). Firmly rooted in Systems Theory, Project Management was already from its inception a set of techniques for the planning, control and evaluation of time-limited activity systems. The techniques were derived from general Operations Analysis, but adapted to the specific notion of unique, highly complex tasks that could not be carried out within the bounds of existing departmentalized organizational structures. Although the field has developed in all directions since then by incorporating theoretical inspiration

from organization theory, leadership, group dynamics, organizational learning and so forth (Söderlund, 2004) and by questioning the epistemological roots in Systems Theory by means of constructionist and critical perspectives (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995, Packendorff, 1995, Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm, 2002, Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006, Cicmil et al, 2009), it still remains a discipline devoted to rationalism. Along with the promises on success and effectiveness made by the professional associations, most scholarly research still aims to construct tools and methods by which all aspects of project work can be planned, controlled and evaluated.

At the same time, there is an undercurrent within the field acknowledging the importance of emotions. Usually it comes in the form of how emotions among project workers may contribute to the success of projects if properly managed – such as advice on how to motivate people and make them feel committed to the project. It thus still implies a rationalist perspective in which the projects and its inhabitants are tools used to achieve goals on higher levels in the organizational system (Packendorff, 1995). But there are also an increasing awareness of – and interest in – how people actually perceive their own reality in project-based work, aimed at the understanding of how projects unfold as processes of organizing rather than at the formulation of prescriptions for success (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Supported by a recent ‘empiricist turn’ in Project Management research, this knowledge development has led to new insights into the realities of project work and the consequences of the general Project Management in the lives of organizations, groups and individuals. In these recent developments, we can clearly see that emotional labour is as conspicuous as it is under-theorized in project work settings.

Viewed from the perspective of the project worker, projects are objects of strong and ambiguous emotions as they constitute episodic ‘building blocks’ of their ongoing work life. There are empirical studies indicating that projects are often perceived as stimulating and exciting experiences, but also as sources of stress, loneliness, disrupted family lives, superficial work place relations etc (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, 2007, Gill, 2002, Packendorff, 2002). While there is thus a stream of current research relating individual

experiences of project work to the specifics of project-based organizing as a structural setting, the perspective of emotions and emotionality has still not been applied to such practices.

On the other hand, there are research in the general field of emotions and organizing that have touched upon project-based work. For example, there are several empirical studies on various consultancies and professional service firms (cf Harris, 2002; Lively, 2000, 2002; Sturdy & Wright, 2008; Kaiser et al, 2008) – which are usually working by projects in their daily pursuit of customer satisfaction and individual careers. Likewise, there is also empirical research on emotional labour among project workers in arts and media organizations (cf Bergman Blix, 2007). However, this research has not focused on emotional work as related to the discursive notion of projects as a reified work form – instead the focus has been on issues such as emotional authenticity, emotional display, client interaction and professional identity.

1.2 Aim of paper

To sum this up, we find that the project work form is a conspicuous facet of modern work life that is becoming increasingly (and positively) reified through discursive processes of rationality, anti-bureaucratization and professionalisation. While there is a growing body of empirical research subjecting the project form and individual experiences of project-based work to critical scrutiny from various theoretical positions, the notion of projects as objects of emotional labour has still not received any attention in the literature. At the same time, projects in practice are often constructed as ‘emotionalized zones’ (Fineman 2006) through demands on involvement and commitment (Kaiser et al, 2008).

Based in these considerations, the aim of the paper is to analyze how projects are constructed as objects of emotions through everyday practices. This is done through analyzing narratives from individuals involved in project-based work, narratives extracted from an earlier study on individuals in projects. In the empirical material, we

find both project managers and project participants, both regular and extraordinary project situations, and both men and women.

The individuals interviewed work in the cultural sector, in theatres and opera houses. The empirical section of the paper will be organized along the three concepts of passion, obsession and depression, describing how individuals conceive of their projects, identities and personal lives during project episodes. In the final analytical section of the paper, we will then extract emotional themes in the narratives, themes related to identities, desires and aesthetics.

2. Projects as objects of emotional labour

Emotions in organizations have been increasingly emphasized over the last two decades (see Fineman, 2006, for an overview). It is important to recognize how people feel upon and experience incidents and practices in organizations, as such emotional labour has impact on different issues in organizations as decision making, leadership, construction of culture etc. However, it is also important to understand that it is a complex web of different sources and different fields that is involved in this construction. People engage in different things and that has to do with the context, profession, gender, identities, power and other that is present in organizations.

In different work contexts we find different aspects of emotional labour and if we study project work we need to understand what kind of context and structures we are dealing with. Individuals in the arts and media sectors are constructing identities related to their professions, identities built upon the traditions within theatrical work and the role theatres are supposed to fill in cultural life and society as a whole. Theatre work is permeated by emotional discourses on artistry, sensitivity, aesthetics and display, and is thus as such a very special setting to study.

The project as a work form is also an institutional discourse of its own, linked to professionalism in various ways (Hodgson, 2002, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2007) but also to notions of rationality and efficiency brought from other discursive settings than the theatre world. We will develop the discourse around project work below.

2.1 Projects as a discursive object – antecedents and themes

The project form emerged in the 1950's as an alternative to standardised, large-scale bureaucracies. Where the latter was built on repetition, stability and ongoing concern, the former emphasised uniqueness, change and temporariness. From such a dichotomous position, the notion of 'good' and 'bad' was not far-fetched; constructing the project form as the long-wanted alternative to ineffective, rigid, boring bureaucracies, as a haven of goal-focused work, creativity and newness (Cicmil et al, 2009). Not only are projects considered suitable ways to achieve temporary stability in turbulent environments (Ekstedt et al, 1999), but more importantly, they are regarded as the appropriate way to stimulate a learning environment and enhance creativity so as to deliver complex products (Hobday, 2000). In this context, project management has been promoted as a powerful and widely-applicable vehicle for integrating diverse functions of an organization, enabling the efficient, timely, and effective accomplishment of goals through the concentration of flexible, autonomous, and knowledgeable individuals in temporary teams.

It is thus not surprising to find that the project form is increasingly being applied to any kind of task in any kind of environment. From having been the natural way of administering complex mega projects in construction, weapon systems development and high-tech innovation, the project form has spread into new occupations, new organizations, new applications and new societal sectors. The business-minded engineer portrayed in Gaddis (1959) as the archetype of the emerging cadre of project managers now find his colleagues among businesspeople, consultants, theatre directors, government officials, social workers and university researchers. All sorts of activities, from legal work to urban regeneration, are increasingly being redefined as 'projects'. The rapidly

growing professional associations for project managers count members from all sectors of society, and project management tools are being used in all kind of organizational settings (Cicmil et al, 2009); “Utterly different things can be assimilated to the term ‘project’: opening a new factory, closing one, carrying out a reengineering project, putting on a play. Each of them is a project, and they all involve the same heroism” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 11).

Following the proliferation of project-based organizations and project-based work, there are claims that project management requires a distinct set of competencies. If the project is such a special work form, then projects should be manned and managed by specialists. The main global actors in the area, such as the professional associations Project Management Institute (PMI) and the International Project Management Association (IPMA) began to create international project management standards in the late 1980’s, i.e. structured bodies of knowledge outlining the competences and detailing the methodologies needed to master the challenge of being a project manager. Today, these organizations offer a range of professional certifications for different levels of experience and different sub-specialities within the field. In order to be certified, candidates must demonstrate both theoretical knowledge based on the standards, and for higher levels of certification, documented practical experience of project work. As an increasing number of corporations and their customers require these certifications from project managers, project management is in a rapid process of professionalization (Hodgson, 2002, 2007).

While this traditional core of the field has indeed met serious challenges over the years - such as the need to coordinate projects within project portfolios, the managerial and motivational aspects often referred to as the ‘human side of projects’, or the unavoidable impact of external complexity on the internal project process – the response remains the same; to construct new, even better, rational tools to ensure project success, reproducing project management as a rational, successful discipline that delivers when bureaucracies do not. The subject of project failure is as under-theorized as it is conspicuous, an unbearable trauma of a success-focused field, carefully avoided by researchers and practitioners alike (Lindahl and Rehn, 2007). And the wider consequences of project

failures, in terms of the human cost borne by those employed in the project, including the project manager her/himself, and the impact on all those affected by the project, tend to go unnoticed, unreported and often suppressed (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006).

2.2 Projects and emotions – themes from related literatures

As previously mentioned, scholarly research on project management has a history of viewing projects as rational activity systems whose functioning can be improved by means of operations management-inspired tools and models. When subjecting this tradition to critique, several scholars have pointed at the need to understand projects from the subjective and inter-subjective perspectives of their ‘inhabitants’ and to emphasize hidden, suppressed and conflicting views (cf Cicmil et al, 2009). In line with this critique, we here want to understand project realities from the perspective of the emotional labour ‘undertaken’ by project workers in relation to their form of work.

There are several considerations needed in order to analyse projects and project-based work as objects of emotional labour. One first such consideration is the importance of labelling, i.e. that by naming something as a ‘project’, a number of socially constructed expectations on the work process are brought from general societal discourses into the local situation by project participants. Projects are usually expected to be planned, controlled episodes of passion, dedication and commitment – as meeting places of pragmatism and passion (cf Landri, 2007). They are also constructed as opposites of the normal, as temporary ‘states of emergency’ where usual norms and rules do not apply (Lindahl, 2006) – and, hence, as strange places for extraordinary emotional work. In project-based work involving a number of parallel projects, there are always several ‘states of emergency’ going on at the same time.

Another consideration is projects as the embodiment of dreams and hopes. Projects are often constructed as opportunities to change something, to achieve something, to break away from something (Cicmil et al, 2009). In that sense projects may become instances of identity work through individual reflection and exposure to new and different social

settings (Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001). They are also constructed as temporary utopias, where the extraordinary can be lived for a short while (Miles, 1964) and the aesthetic fulfilment of individual, technical or managerial desire is within reach – for a while. On the other side of the coin is the emotional risks involved in case of failure (Lindahl and Rehn, 2007), the risk for obsession, of ending up in situations where heroism and sacrifices are needed in order to rectify situations where planning and control models have collapsed. There is also the risk of ‘post-projectic depression’ related to the inevitable ending of temporary utopias.

A third consideration concerns projects as instances of professional display, i.e. that mastering demanding project work situations become a part of being professional, reliable and successful. To be able to show superiority in project management becomes increasingly important among, e.g., theatre professionals (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007), computer programmers (Case and Piñeiro, 2009), financial services staff (Hodgson, 2002) and product development engineers (Andersson and Wickelgren, 2009) alike. As objects related to the emerging profession of project management, projects also become objects of professionalism and pride (Hodgson, 2002). Each project embodies the possibility of being hailed for your excellent professional display, but also the risk of being subject to scandal and humiliation – in a work life characterized by ‘Warhol moments’ and a constant pursuit of employability, “you are only as good as your last project”.

In this paper we have organized the empirical data along the concepts of passion, obsession and depression, being three emotional aspects of project work rather than separate states of mind. By ‘passion’ we intend the desire to engage positively in work, a desire both held by individuals and expected from management (cf Kaiser et al, 2008). ‘Obsession’ is then the tendency to focus strongly on work, which both has the positive facet of total commitment and the negative facet of becoming entirely absorbed. The third aspect, ‘depression’ relates to the negative consequences of obsession (the positive ones remaining passionate, of course) such as burn-out and detachment from other spheres of life.

3. The empirical study

In this empirical section, we study the project as an object of emotional labour in the empirical setting of theatres and opera houses. As project studies in general are usually concerned with commercial projects in sectors such as construction, product development, IT consultancy and professional services, theatres may seem as somewhat deviant representatives of project-based organizations. On the other hand, we find theatres – and theatre projects - to be excellent settings for this kind of study as they are highly emotionalized meeting places of several cultural professions, meeting places where ‘the project’ as a work form is in the process of being internalized as an inevitable ingredient in everyday work (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007, Lehner, 2008). As noted already in 1981 in a study on the production of theatre plays and other forms of projects, an important

“...concern in the management of temporary systems is the effect of outside, personal, or organizational life space on the task performance of participants. [...] 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.” (Goodman, 1981: 41)

We have used stories from two theatres: (1) the government-funded big Baltic Opera House, and (2) the co-owned small Improvisation theatre. Despite their differences, they work in almost the same way. The main characteristics and the interviewees of both theatres and the projects analysed in this paper are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Summary of the two case studies.

	<u>Improvisation theatre (IMPRO)</u>	<u>Baltic Opera House (BOH)</u>
<u>Organisation</u>	Co-owned private theatre, re-created after a bankruptcy. Performances, courses and theatre projects for companies. 7 full-time employees, 29 part-time.	State-funded public opera house with its own symphony orchestra. Sets up operas, concerts and ballets. 90 full-time employees, 3 part-time.
<u>Project</u>	Setting up a new improvised play.	Setting up an opera play.
<u>Project results</u> (according to team)	Tested new ways of improvised narrating, learnt a lot. Well-received by audience.	Well-known Italian opera for the large audience. Performed at the first night as planned. Well-received by audience.
<u>Team composition</u>	Producer works both with administration and marketing, director leads rehearsals. Actors rehearse and play together with single musician and a lighting improvisator.	Producer works with administration, director leads rehearsals together with costume manager, scenic designer and orchestra conductor. Stage manager act as project coordinator. Actors rehearse and play.
<u>Interviewed team members</u> (fictive name, age, role)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nathan, 37, theatre manager • John, 43, actor • Patrick, 42, director • Ursula, 31, producer • Sarah, 35, actor • Anne, 34, actor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rosalind, 45, producer • Barbara, 41, costume manager • Roger, 48, scenic artist • Tom, 41, stage manager • Mary, 33, orchestra violinist

In addition to these two case studies, we have also used material from an interview with a former musical theatre manager, Toby. Today 38 years old, Toby leads a project-based governmental organization within the cultural sector, but he is also often hired to share his experiences on project work in musical productions.

All individuals were asked for their spontaneous story on their life including both work and life in general during a specific project. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed, and lasted for two-three hours with each person. Given the basic question on emotional labour in relation to projects as objects of work, each interview evolved around a number of themes based in earlier studies. Examples of such themes were the view of the project concept, the commitment of individuals to projects (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006),

how individuals related to project specifics (definition, roles, time, deadlines, technology, cf Strauss, 1988), how individuals describe themselves in relation to work and established identity bases (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007) and the role of aesthetics and feelings in project-based work (Kaiser et al, 2008). Project work as gendered, i.e. as constructions of femininity and masculinity, were also taken into account (cf Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, Watts, 2008, Crevani and Shinozaki Lennerfors, 2009). Boje (2001) describe thematic analysis out from deductive and inductive approaches and for us it has been a combination of these two ways, where a number of general theoretical themes have formed a framework for the inductive extractment of specific narratives which were organized along the concepts of passion, obsession and depression. We took a special interest in contradictions and competing discourses as emotional labour is not only an aspect of social processes in organizations, but central to the development of power structures and notions of ‘professionalism’ – intending the study of emotional labour to be critical and emancipatory rather than a detached account of experiential discourses (Sturdy, 2003).

4. At the theatre: Passion, obsession and depression

4.1 Passion

According to our interviewees, theatre work always involve passion (cf also Bergman Blix, 2007). Passion comes in many aspects and is based in many ‘sources’. One such ‘source of passion’ is the notion of theatre work as implying the creation of something new, letting go of established truths and practices:

“The actors just love to jump into unknown challenges where they do not know what they are doing. You have to have courage; dare to fail, to loose control, to forget things. Sometimes it goes wrong; it is permitted to go wrong. It is an incredible piece of teamwork – we usually say that we only have co-actors at stage.

It all goes back to have a keen ear for each other, to take care of each other.”
(Nathan, IMPRO)

“We do not want to repeat things, get stuck in old patterns. During the last project we actively tried to avoid that by bringing in external impulses. That works very well, we are now rehearsing with a vocalist in order to develop improvised singing. I think it is necessary to be open in that sense, that you borrow external specialists that bring in fresh knowledge. You get a kick out of it, and hopefully you improve. Then you do not repeat yourself, since you have added something to your repertoire of expressions.” (John, IMPRO)

“All we do is based in love for what we do here. We have an ardent passion for improvisation theatre! Of course there were more people that wanted to become co-owners, but we wanted the total freedom that we can allow each other in this constellation. Nathan is not an actor, but he is with us because he loves this theatre so much.” (Sarah, IMPRO)

The challenges – seen as emerging from the context or being brought upon them by themselves – are often emerging within special settings, providing the challenges with boundaries and reason. The place where such newness can be created is almost always a new project:

“I have always wanted to learn new things. You can be tired after a project, but when the director and the scenic designer gives you new blueprints, you get yourself going again – it is a damned nice feeling! I know that I will fix it somehow. You have to be special to work at a theatre, work must to mean something to you, and people can see if you are not paying enough attention.” (Roger, BOH)

“When I think of this job of mine, I do not find anything to be negative. What might be strenuous is when the opening night gets closer and closer and everyone’s

nerves start to affect the process. Is everything OK? Will we be successful? The actors get really nervous and there are emotional outbursts and so on. All these things cause stress for me, but not always negative stress.” (Barbara, BOH)

The passionate relationship to the projects also overrides ‘rational’ reasons for work, such as money and careers:

“Our salaries are lousy, and it is hard for us to maintain our own house despite that we have both been working for ten years now. On the other hand, I learn new things all the time, and there are always new challenges. It is an amazing feeling to be able to learn things that I had never been able to do before. Sometimes, I really feel privileged to get a salary for just playing the violin.” (Mary, BOH)

“The reason why I left corporate life is that this is so much more fun. It is fantastic to work with a dedicated team that really has an artistic glow... I get my kicks in life from two things. The first one is then the audience leaves the theatre and I stand here in the foyer and hear them laugh, smile and cry. I hear them speak about how much fun it was, I love that feeling. And then the actors come out, laugh and feel that they have done a good performance. When these two things happen at the same time, that is my reward. That is what I work for, that the actors feel challenged and happy as improvisators, and that the audience walks home moved and happy.” (Nathan, IMPRO)

Most of our interviewees also embrace the idea of the project work form as an object enabling them to enact their passion for theatre:

Sometimes, you must dare to do something as insane as we did when moving the Miss Saigon musical from London to Stockholm. Not just playing safe all the time. Somehow, that is what project work is about. It is connected to an event, an opening night, to give birth to something new. (Toby)

“Projects are good. They have a start, a work process and an ending. And when they are finished you can not do anything more, they do not stick to your mind anymore.” (Barbara, BOH)

“In a theatre there are two forms of organisation. The ordinary structure that goes on all the time, and then we have the project organization where everything is projects. It is really very satisfying that you complete tasks and achieve results. If you then receive positive criticism in the press, then you have really accomplished something. And it is not one project only; it is several ones in parallel.” (Rosalind, BOH)

4.2 Obsession

The enthusiasm and passion for projects and theatrical work is often on the verge of obsession, appearing in a variety of feelings relating to the intensity of commitment to work and the anxieties on what might happen if not being committed enough. One such aspect, combining the commitments and the anxieties, is the notion of flexibility, i.e. the perceived need to be flexible to work even harder in the project when needed:

“I am really a flexible employee! And I must be one! New things happen all the time [in the project] and I must be creative and think new thoughts. You must always adapt to the situation at hand!” (Barbara, BOH)

Projects tend to be very intense after a while. When the stage is available, when the decor shall be built, when the lights shall be installed, at the same time as we are rehearsing with the full cast – then there is no more flexibility in private life. We are talking minutes and seconds here. People - often women - who need to pick up kids at kindergarten cannot count upon a great deal of sympathy and understanding. (Toby)

For some of our interviewees, flexibility is not a major issue. They have made more or less conscious choices to devote their life to their work, and work usually comes first. Still, this is a source of anxiety and regret:

"I work a lot. I have no children. When I do not work here I work with other projects. I write, I read, I travel, I see people. Many of my friends are from the theatre world and from this town, and as an outsider I am stuck with them. I think it is a drawback for me that I have no other social arenas. No natural relations."
(Patrick, IMPRO)

"How much I work? Not more than 40 hours a week [laugh]. No, I never count the hours. I have kids, but I am divorced... but the kids want attention and that is good. When they are not staying with me it is more dangerous, it is much easier to stay here at the theatre. Instead of going home to my stinking two-room apartment I hang out at work [laugh]". (John, IMPRO)

If obsession then is perceived as both necessary and problematic, there are several ways of explaining to oneself and others (in this case two researchers) why obsession is voluntarily chosen. One such feeling that is used to explain the ambiguities of obsession is indispensability:

"Of course I am replaceable, and I don't want to feel indispensable. But in some situations I am, and I don't like that. If I should die on the spot, the project would go on anyway, but often I just have to go down to the opera to ensure that work continues. You feel indispensable during quite long periods, especially when you are working against a deadline." (Roger, BOH)

"An orchestra is like a construction team. The hall and the equipment are there generating costs all the time, and then you force everybody to come there at the same time. I certainly don't want to be the one who cause delays and extra

rehearsals, so I must be well prepared. Of course this is stressful, and it is a stress that you must learn to live with here at the opera.” (Mary, BOH)

An alternative way of reasoning is to explain obsession by reference to structural contingencies, such as deadlines, planned workload, unforeseen events or the expectation that it is for a limited time only:

“My formal work hours are 8 am through 5 pm, but then we have our deadlines where everything shall be delivered. Then there is no choice other than to work overtime, and then there are rehearsals and performances in the evenings that you must attend. A lot of irregular work hours, indeed.” (Barbara, BOH)

“I am responsible for the whole department, but in this specific project I must work the evenings too – I run the department at daytime and the project during the evenings. The reason is that I have a project in another town also, and I sent my best employee there. So I do everything here and I trust that she lives up to our responsibilities there.” (Barbara, BOH)

“An orchestra is a strict hierarchy, from the conductor downwards. This fall, we had a concert and some days before, the conductor replaced one of the songs. He thought that we knew the new one from the past, but we did not and it was also technically complicated. When such things happen, I serve take-away food to my family the whole week and skip the laundry.” (Mary, BOH)

”I was really close to a breakdown in that project. It went well, though, I survived. But everything else fell apart. You can work 80 hours a week if you know it is just for a while, if you can take a month off afterwards. But if we are talking 120 hours, you never get undressed before going to bed, you skip taking a shower due to a lack of time. It’s really that bad. To some extent this was my own fault, but there were also a lot of complicated – but not insurmountable – issues that came up and called for major revisions of the manuscript. No one knew the musical as I did at the time,

and no one was able to do the translations as I was. If we had brought in a second guy, he would have needed two months to get on top of things.” (Toby)

Some interviewees even refer to their projects as drugs and their hard work as based in addictions - work as getting the 'fix' they need to move on despite their feelings of nervousity and anxiety:

“Big theatrical projects are very special. Everyone who has been on stage or beside the stage knows that you cannot let go of work. It is a poison, a drug. (Toby)

“People are always worried, and some can get quite nasty when they are nervous. We rehearse during eight weeks, and when there are three weeks left to the first night, nobody thinks there will ever be a performance. It's just chaos. It is always like that, that is how it is supposed to be in projects. If you had no deadlines, you could go on forever, which would be quite unsatisfying. Knowing that you will be ready and knowing that everybody is working in the same direction, that is a fantastic feeling.” (Rosalind, BOH)

“I work 50-55 hours a week, sometimes weekends too. I can't let go of it, I burn for it. And I am always lagging behind. The atmosphere and all the activity here is most exciting, but it consumes me. You can never focus on anything; as soon as you are into a discussion on important stuff someone calls or knocks at the door.” (Nathan, IMPRO)

A final aspect of obsession is – still – the anxieties of making a living in an industry characterised by economic troubles and scarce resources. Once one project has been successfully completed, the economic worries resurface:

“It has been too much work, and now it has slowed down a bit. But then you start to worry about lack of work. I never used to worry before, but now I do. We have felt

the recession; several of the big corporations have stopped calling us.” (Sarah, IMPRO)

4.3 Depression

An aspect often mentioned as a result of sustained obsession is the feeling of having reached the limit of one’s abilities, of sacrificing mental and physical health for the sake of project success:

“This project was extreme, by all comparisons. Such a workload can not be combined with family life, not even with upholding relations to friends. After six months like that, you are history. I had sort of a mental hangover. Emptiness, almost a depression. I am not the depressive kind of person, but I felt burned-out. I closed down my professional life for a long while afterwards.” (Toby)

“Stress is a different thing for different people. If I have a lot to do I feel capable and I get a lot of work done. I demand a lot of myself, but if these demands become too high I feel bad, my stomach hurts and I think that everything is just bullshit. I do not get angry and yell at people, I just get apathetic and tired when I come home.” (Rosalind, BOH)

“It has been too much, much too much. And tonight it is the big opening night! [bursts into tears] I can’t do it, I have no energy, I’m finished. I do not understand how this will work out at all, it is so damned hard!” (Anne, IMPRO)

“I have this island in Greece where I always go to relax and have fun. This time, after the project, I just sat there at a balcony for three weeks, just read books, didn’t speak to anyone. Kind of tunnel vision. I actually think that the project affected the whole year afterwards, in the sense that I became introvert and lost my optimism. This hangover lasted very long, possibly even until today. You should warn people about this, I think.” (Toby)

Some of our female respondents attribute the negative aspects of project work to traditional masculinities – where projects are seen as competitive challenges and hard work as a display of professionalism and dedication. The importance of getting the project done often implies that widely held professional and organizational values – such as empathy, consideration and egalitarianism – are downplayed in everyday work:

“I am the only woman here among the owners, and sometimes I regret that there are no more women. I feel that. We all communicate in a masculine fashion, and it is not easy to be too much of a feminist in our meetings. It works all right, but there is a macho attitude among us that becomes a part of our culture. I speak openly about this because I want all people to be attracted to this theatre, not just tough guys. If one of the guys is in a bad mood, everyone tips around on their toes, people yell at each other and so forth.” (Sarah, IMPRO)

One other aspect of depression is negative feelings related to the need to maintain the functioning of the permanent organizational context while having to focus on the individual project. Organizational and bureaucratic ambiguities tend to drain our interviewees of emotional energy:

“I like my colleagues, but then there are always problems that upset me; organizational matters that concerns the whole theatre and not specifically my project. These things affect my job and make me stressed and confused. One such thing is all the unclear orders and rules that come from the theatre director.” (Rosalind, BOH)

Depression is also closely related to heroism – i.e. that heroic action is a last resort when all plans have failed. Heroic action signifies that things have gone wrong despite all the commitments and anxieties ‘invested’ in the project by the team members, and that the heroes are rarely acknowledged for their extraordinary sacrifices:

“My husband is one of the stage managers here, and I do not think that anyone in the organisation really understand how much he accomplishes. When he is ill I take care of his job even though I am a musician, but it is because I know how he works. The theatre manager do not understand how good it is to have such a hard-working man in the organization, and when I jumped into his shoes when he caught the flu last fall I was not recognized at all for that extra effort. That’s the way it is – if something happens you just have to let go of everything that you do and run away to fix it. The project is saved, but no one is thankful to you.” (Mary, BOH)

A final aspect of depression is that the negative experiences are not only related to a specific project, and that the sad emotional state will remain long after the project is gone. This notion of depression – i.e. that there is no way out and that there is no end to the current state of mind – can be found in several statements by our interviewees. Such statements may concern the mourning of a project that has ‘passed away’, but also the expectation that future projects will not be better:

“My experience is that project work can lead to a projectified life, and that such a life is unhealthy. I felt that my friends and relatives did not accept that I became so consumed by the project, and they strongly objected to my priorities. I live as a single, which makes this easier, and I try to always reserve some time for my friends. But the next time you enter a project, it will probably be the same. Many project leaders emphasise control over trust, and control often leads to a sense of stress and claustrophobia. You learn so much from a project, but you need some time off afterwards to see what you can use in the future. I hope I can do that the next time.” (Toby)

5. Emotionalizing projects, projectifying emotions

In this final analytical section of the paper, we intend to extract emotional themes in the narratives, themes related to identities, desires and aesthetics. Below, we will develop the

meaning and practice of themes and also discuss how passion, obsession and depression are interacting in the emotional labour related to projects as objects of work.

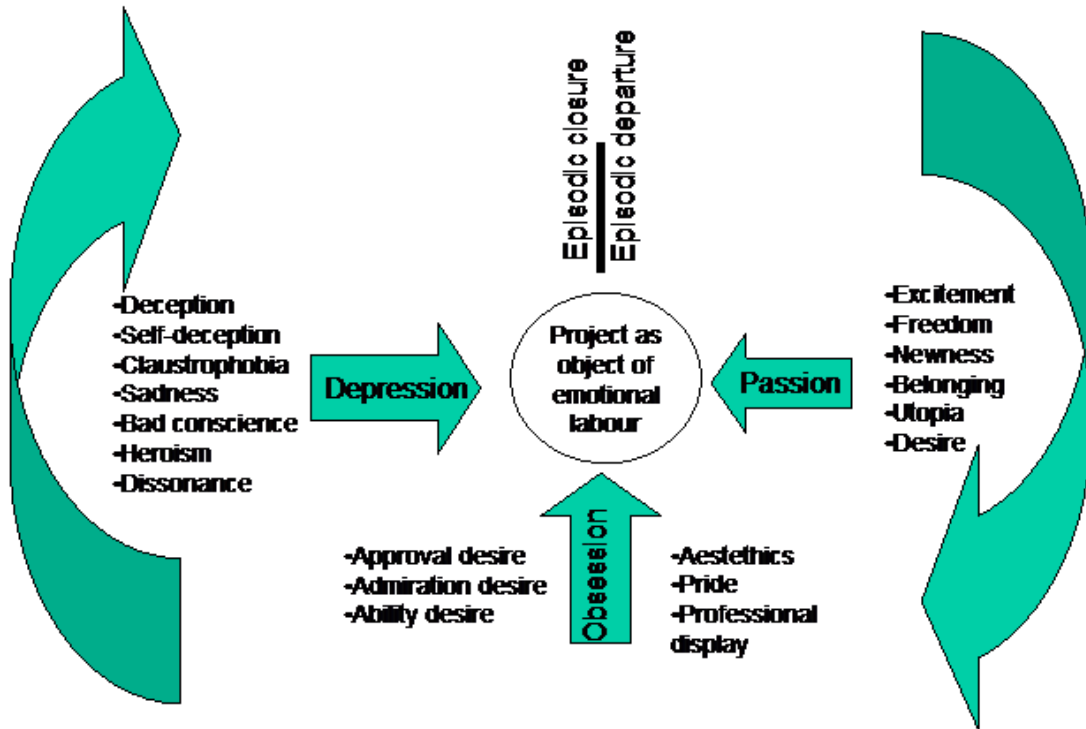
A first such theme, mainly connected to projects as objects of desire, is the notion of projects as places in space and time where new and exciting things may happen. Although the project form in itself is not seen as a guarantee for such newness, projects are still described as settings where artistic freedom is allowed and encouraged. A project is also another possibility to break away from the past, another window of opportunity for artistic fulfilment. Belonging to a project is a sign of belonging to the theatre (not least for part-time employees), and doing what you are supposed to do at a theatre (i.e. not doing administration, internal politics or accounting). As objects of desire, projects represent the possibilities and opportunities of passion.

A second theme in our empirical material is the notion of projects as arenas for professional display, a notion involving passion, obsession and depression simultaneously. This theme is closely linked to professional aesthetics, i.e. the professionalism inherent in doing a good and beautiful job, in a manner characterized by the highest possible artistic standards, seeking the approval and admiration of both peers and the audience (cf Case & Piñeiro, 2009). Passion in itself is on display, but also the professionalism of displaying obsession for the sake of artistic achievement, of letting the theatre come before everything else in life for a while. Artistry is here also connected to managerialism (in the sense that delivering the best possible performance at the opening night is both a sign of artistic and managerial abilities), in a way that will probably affect the professional identities of theatrical workers by time (cf Hodgson, 2002, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2007).

A third theme is the emotional labour related to projects as objects characterized by dissonance, hypocrisy and deception. This theme mainly involves the emotional states of obsession and depression, as it is related to the perception of projects as not living up to

expectations. Although the artistic ambitions and visions may be fulfilled, the working conditions are often described in terms of deadline stress, chaos, conflicts and problems of upholding a meaningful private life. It involves feelings of being deceived by oneself and others in the pursuit of the perfect project, of being overly committed to a cause that would probably have succeeded anyway. Insofar heroic action takes place; it is a display of professionalism that is seen as unwanted, unnecessary and rarely acknowledged. This emotional labour concerns the project as an object that does not deliver, that produces winners and losers, that cause emotional strains and conflict within and between project participants.

As projects are episodic by nature and (almost) always accompanied by parallel projects and followed by new ones, each project becomes a kind of 'critical incident' in the life of a theatre worker. The emotional experiences from one project are brought over to new project, at the same time as the new project is also perceived as an opportunity to break away from the old experiences. In that sense, each project seems to involve a complex pattern of emotional labour, which we have tried to capture in the following figure:



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