Projectification and its consequences: Narrow and broad conceptualisations

by

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0. Abstract

In this article, we argue that an increased focus on the processes of projectification would be beneficial to project research. By introducing a distinction between narrow and broad conceptualisations of projectification, we extend this research area from its current concern with the increased primacy of projects in contemporary organisational structures into an interest for cultural and discursive processes in society in which notions of projects are invoked. Through an illustration from our earlier empirical research on the sustenance of project work form and the consequences thereof, the implications of applying broad conceptualisations are further discussed.

Key words: Projectification, organisational structure, discourse analysis, project research
1. Introduction

In this article we focus our attention to the emerging notion of *projectification* (cf. Midler, 1995; Maylor *et al.*, 2006) – suggesting that it should be seen not only as a management fad and a structural trajectory in corporate re-structuring, but as a multi-faceted phenomenon to be studied in its own right. By theorizing projectification also as a cultural and discursive phenomenon, project research may not only be able to analyse how and why corporate structures change as a result of increased project intensity, but also of how these change processes unfold and their consequences for individuals, project teams, organisations, industrial networks, and society.

The notion of projectification has emerged as projects have become a common form of work organisation in all sectors of the economy during recent decades. It is perhaps most visible in the transformation of traditional firms into “project-based firms”, i.e., organisations where almost all operations are organised as projects and where permanent structures fill the function of administrative support (cf. Hobday, 2000; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Söderlund and Tell, 2009). 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; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009). The project is seen as a promise of both controllability and adventure (Sahlin-Andersson, 2002) and as a necessity when complex and extraordinary business tasks are to be managed (Cicmil *et al.*, 2009). In that sense, project-based work is also 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 and Packendorff, 2006a; Söderlund, 2011).

It is thus not surprising to find that the scholarly debate on research directions, areas of interest, theoretical and methodological assumptions, etc., relating to this development has been intense (cf. Packendorff, 1995; Söderlund, 2004; Winter *et al.*, 2006; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009; Jacobsson and Söderholm, 2011; Hällgren, 2012; Packendorff, 2014). Right from its inception project management research was defined through its focus on the single project as unit of analysis – understood as a manageable and researchable item whose intrinsic mechanisms
were to be uncovered in pursuit of project success (Packendorff, 1995). As a result of the practical developments whereby projects became a dominating form of organising in many organisations, project management research eventually also came to include inquiry into the management of bundles of projects – e.g. programmes, project portfolios, project management offices etc. – and the processes whereby projects and programmes were granted increased primacy as organisational forms (Maylor et al, 2006). As suggested by Söderlund (2004), a re-phrasing of the field from ‘project management research’ to ‘project research’ is thus important in order to acknowledge this development and also further extending the area of interest beyond single organisations through analysing the organising of inter-firm projects (cf. Braun et al, 2012) and through attending to patterns and developments at sectorial and societal levels (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998; Grabher, 2002b).

The development towards the use of projects for handling complex tasks and creative renewal in contemporary organisations has in project research literatures increasingly been referred to as ‘projectification’1 (cf. Midler, 1995; Ekstedt et al, 1999; Bredin and Söderlund, 2006; Maylor et al, 2006; Kerr, 2008; Arvidsson, 2009; Ekstedt, 2009; Blomquist and Lundin, 2010; Aubry and Lenfle, 2012; Bergman et al, 2013). In this narrow view of projectification – what Maylor et al (2006) refers to as ‘organisational projectification’ – research is mainly focussed on the contents and consequences of organisational re-structuring initiatives taken in order increase the primacy of projects within a firm and its immediate supply network (p. 666). However, the concept has also been employed in a broad sense, building on recent critical inquiry into individual experiences of project work (cf. Packendorff, 2002; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006a; Hodgson et al, 2011), and the analysis of projects as a central discursive theme in contemporary society (cf. Lindgren et al, 2001; Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Cicmil et al, 2009; Kuura, 2011). Taken together, extant research thus presents us with a situation where processes of projectification are becoming increasingly relevant for the understanding of almost any aspect of the contemporary economy. At the same time, most project research appears to be empirically limited to reified and entitative notions of

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1 As noted by Bredin and Söderlund (2011: 9), there are also similar conceptualisations for this phenomenon, such as ‘projectization’ (Peters, 1992), projectivization’ (Ekstedt et al, 1999) and ‘project intensification’ (Bredin and Söderlund, 2006). In this article, the concept of ‘projectification’ is seen as including also these other labels of the phenomenon.
'projects’ or ‘programmes’ without reflecting upon the processes whereby these phenomena are constructed, developed and institutionalised.

Arguing that an increased focus on the processes of projectification in a broad sense would be beneficial to project research, we will in this article (1) explore the established narrow usage of the concept, (2) identify streams of thought in the emerging broad notion of projectification, and (3) provide an illustration from our own on-going research of the benefits of moving from a narrow to a broad view. Before delving into these three main issues, we will briefly relate this back to the on-going debate on current developments in project research and practice.

2. Project research – from where, to where?

Project work was for long seen as a marginal phenomenon in the world of organisations, and also constructed as an opposite of dominating on-going operations (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Ekstedt et al, 1999; Cicmil et al, 2009). The increased use of projects and project management within almost all societal sectors has resulted in a powerful and well—established practical knowledge field that set out to provide project managers with tools and methodologies for achieving project success. It is a discipline originally focussed on forms and vocabularies for planning and control, supported by powerful conceptual and visual imagery such as Gantt charts and network diagrams. Since the 1970s, several aspects of the task of leading projects have gradually been included, such as team leadership, risk management, stakeholder management, etc. The creation of globally accepted project management certifications built on these forms and vocabularies and the ensuing professionalisation of the project manager role are some of the most recent ingredients in the establishment of project management as a distinct practical discipline in business life and society (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007). The discipline also incorporates current developments in the management of portfolios of projects and project management offices, thereby expanding into positions and organisational levels other than the single project.

Project research thus early set out to understand the specifics of this ‘deviant’ form of organising – materialising as projects, temporary organisations, adhocracies or an instance
of post-bureaucratic organising (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006a). The scholarly field thus sprung out of a growing need to handle exceptional situations in a structured manner and the notion of exceptionality is still a trigger for research (cf. Hällgren and Wilson, 2011). The theoretical and practical developments have often paralleled each other, and project research has increasingly adopted theoretical concepts and constructs from general management and engineering research in order to advance the understanding of projects and project management (Packendorff, 2014).

The on-going debates on theoretical influences and perspectives within project research is of vital importance for future developments, in the sense that all well-established disciplines usually both find ways to escape stagnation at the same time as they easily become victims of precisely that. Among the promises in current project research we thus find an expanding and yet maturing stream of research concerned with the development of the discipline beyond established concepts and theories. It is a growing literature questioning the relevance and consequences of dominating perspectives (cf. Packendorff 1995, Cicmil et al, 2006; Blomquist et al, 2010), vividly debating, e.g., theoretical foundations (Söderlund, 2004; 2011), axiological assumptions (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006), root metaphors (Packendorff, 1995), ontological/epistemological orientations (Winter et al, 2006; Blomquist et al, 2010; Sergi, 2012), field limitations (Hallin and Karrbom Gustavsson, 2010) or the way of identifying research problems and questions (Hällgren, 2012). Twenty years ago, project management was still a marginal phenomenon – now it is a dominant work form in many organisations and industries, and has also attracted increased interest in general management literature (cf. Söderlund, 2011). Project researchers thus should have an even more excellent opportunity than before to contribute to the general knowledge development on contemporary management problems and practice (Jacobsson and Söderholm, 2011; Packendorff, 2014).

As project research gradually evolves into a distinct field in its own right, characterised by more or less taken-for-granted notions of how projects should be studied and theorised, project researchers will inevitably be met by expectations to ‘perform research’ in a legitimate manner. That could mean to subjugate to labelling of projects without further
ado, to exaggerate similarities between projects while suppressing the differences, to aim for the adding of knowledge to extant bodies of knowledge without questioning the *raison d’être* of these bodies – thereby taking part in promoting and sustaining a certain view of reality, of knowledge, of good and bad. It would also imply that projects to be studied are sought for within the usual industries, among the usual professionals and through the established channels (Hallin and Karrbom Gustavsson, 2010).

The alternative is, of course, to embrace the fluidity and ambiguity of the project concept, viewing project work as an on-going social construction in society of which we are all co-constructors, as a process of institutionalisation and change, of power and emancipation (Sergi, 2012). But that does imply that research must be founded upon explicit assumptions on ontology, epistemology and axiology rather than slipping into the comfort of letting project management journal editors judge what is publishable. Attendance to basic assumptions will not only enhance the development of project research and its relevance to general management scholars; it may also imply a changed view of how project management knowledge is made available and relevant to practitioners. Project management knowledge is often presented to the public in the form of a toolbox, generally applicable and ready for usage (Packendorff, 1995), conveying an image of project management practitioners as in desperate need of clarity, order and standardised procedures. As noted by Pellegrinelli (2010), research should instead be a reflection and articulation…:

“…of their lived experiences –*what they often see and tend to do.* […] Managing is often less about planning, directing and controlling and more about *coping*. The absence of clarity and certainty is not an impediment to action, but a call for it – to ‘get on’. Social reality for them feels malleable and changing, amenable (at least to some degree) to their influence. Some practitioners have got over, or learnt to live with, the sea-sickness.” (p. 237)

Where research on projectification is concerned, the taken-for-grantedness of rational and structural approaches inherited from mainstream project research imply obvious limitations of what research questions that can be stated, the methodologies that might be employed, the theoretical perspectives that are seen as relevant, and the analyses and conclusions that
are made possible. Our notion of ‘narrowness’ in the views of projectification that tend to dominate project research stems from such limitations – by limiting research on projectification to organisational restructurings only, many questions concerning the reasons, implications and consequences of projectification are left unattended and suppressed. Our alternative, the broad notion of projectification, implies a widened approach to all these issues. The main differences between the narrow and broad views of projectification are summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notion of projects</th>
<th>Narrow view of projectification</th>
<th>Broad view of projectification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Notion of projects</strong></td>
<td>Organisational units characterised by temporariness, uniqueness, goal-focus and complexity.</td>
<td>Projects as labels, cultural symbols and discursive notions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Notion of projectification</strong></td>
<td>Processes of organisational re-structuring initiatives taken in order increase the primacy of projects within a firm and its immediate supply network.</td>
<td>Processes of invoking projects as habitual, legitimate and performative responses to conditions and challenges in contemporary society.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Main theoretical perspectives</strong></td>
<td>Structural organisation theory, contingency theory, strategic management, human resource management</td>
<td>Sociology, symbolic interactionism, discourse analysis, critical management theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main research interests</strong></td>
<td>• Organisational restructurings towards project-based forms &lt;br&gt;• Drivers of organisational projectification &lt;br&gt;• Consequences of projectification in terms of efficiency, innovation, customer orientation, professionalism and new patterns of work</td>
<td>• Projects and project management as ideal and norm in organisations, societal life and private life &lt;br&gt;• Consequences of projectification for individuals, groups, organisations and societies. &lt;br&gt;• Dominating and suppressed aspects of projects and project management.</td>
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Table 1: Narrow and broad conceptualisations of projectification in project research

The narrow and broad conceptualisations do not only differ in terms of what projectification means (formal restructuring vs. cultural construction) but also in terms of consequences. While the narrow conceptualisation is primarily aimed at identifying how projectified structures are built and how this affects organisational effectiveness and prosperity, the broad one also includes consequences for individuals, groups and societies. In the following
two sections, we will further discuss the two conceptualisations; their main underpinnings, directions and research implications.

3. Projectification as restructuring: Narrow views

The conceptualisation of projectification that we term as narrow is usually based in an instrumental and structural notion of the project form as an organisational solution to certain types of tasks. This is a notion that links back to classic Organisation Theory, in which the need for handling complex and non-routine tasks was identified during the heydays of contingency theory. Examples of such early theoretical treatments is the identification of single unit production tasks (Woodward, 1958), the ‘adhocratic’ organisational form needed for innovative and extraordinary work (Mintzberg, 1979), and the notion of temporary organisational settings as rational and task-oriented exceptions from ordinary organisational life (Miller and Rice, 1967). These lines of reasoning were later extended in several ways, such as Heckscher and Donnellon's (1994) suggestion of post-bureaucratic ways of organising work along tasks rather than departments, Goodman’s (1981) treatise of temporary systems as an emerging form of work organisation, and Ciborra’s (1996) idea that innovative organisations should be analysed as platforms enabling various organisational forms, improvisations and experiments to go on in pursuit of innovation and creativity.

Against this general backdrop, the specific usage of projects and project management in contemporary organisations has been further analysed in a series of writings intended to shed light upon what the project form may contribute to organisational prosperity, how the project form is combined with other organisational configurations, and what managerial challenges that occur in the process of projectifying on-going operations (Bredin and Söderlund, 2011). Often, this is done by invoking the notion of the project-based organisation as a distinct organisational form, a solution to certain strategic and managerial problems, and as an end state of a series of organisational restructurings (Hobday, 2000; Söderlund and Tell, 2009). Referring to Davies et al (2006), Maylor et al thus trace projectification back to the insight that

"[...] organisations in all types of industries are finding that traditional organisational structures, including functional departments, business units and divisions set up for
managing high-volume throughputs of standardised products and services and for making decisions in a relatively stable technological and market environment, are no longer adequate. In the rapidly changing and increasingly turbulent and uncertain environment they face today organisations are finding that some sort of project organisation is better suited to the kind of one-off or temporary problems that they have to deal with.” (Maylor et al, 2006: 664)

In contemporary literatures, this increased usage of the project-based form in an organisation takes several different shapes and are justified with reference to both historical developments and intended benefits. While the individual project as such – a temporary, unique, goal-focussed and complex undertaking (cf. Packendorff, 1995) – seems to be a rather standardised matter, there is a range of possible ways of fitting it into an existing organisation. The various matrix arrangements available is a recurring theme in the literature (Larson and Gobeli, 1987; Davies et al, 2006; Maylor et al, 2006; Arvidsson, 2009), as well as the various solutions to the problem of integrating multi-project-based operations into coordinated portfolios through standardised project management methods and project management offices (De Maio et al, 1994; Engwall and Jerbrant, 2003; Blomquist and Müller, 2006; Aubry et al, 2007). The project-based organisational form thus centres on the individual project as the unit in which production and innovation happens, in a setting characterised by product/systems complexity, cross-functional cooperation, batch-oriented production, horizontal communication and team-based work (Söderlund and Tell, 2009; Bredin and Söderlund, 2011).

A limited number of studies have explicitly focussed on the processes of projectification over time. Midler (1995) and Söderlund and Tell (2009) describe projectification as a series of restructurings by which traditional functional structures are gradually transformed into heavyweight project forms and projects become increasingly autonomous and customer-focussed. In both these cases, the drivers are external market demands implying increased customisation and technology integration, in combination with internal aspirations to simplify organisational communication and decision-making and empower project teams. In their review of several studies of projectification, Maylor et al (2006) also add that these restructurings imply an increased number of projects, an increased reliance on codified
bodies of project management knowledge (such as stage-gate models and in-house standardised frameworks), an increased emphasis on project performance when evaluating organisational effectiveness, and an increased prevalence of project management offices and similar functional devices specialised for project-based operations.

Some of this research is also concerned with consequences of projectification. Maylor et al (2006), Turner et al (2008) and Söderlund and Bredin (2011) point to potentially negative consequences from both organisational and individual levels, such as the danger of re-bureaucratisation, the neglected need for integration of projects into programmes or portfolios, limited time for knowledge development, overwhelming deadline stress, and lack of trust and social continuity. Jerbrant (2013) emphasise that projectification is indeed driven by perceived consequences, in the sense that every subsequent restructuring solves some problems but also imply new ones – portraying projectification also as a series of emerging uncertainties that are handled.

To sum this up, the narrow conceptualisation of projectification has gone to great lengths to identify the basic structural tenets of project-based organisational forms and the conditions associated with the gradual restructuring of former functional organisations. The literature also contains well-developed understandings of the relation between market developments, technological change and the aspects of organisations that are affected and altered through processes of projectification. Some research has also taken individual perspectives into account, departing not only from organisational effectiveness but also from individual well-being as central to the understanding of consequences and outcomes. The basic weakness of the narrow view – i.e., that projectification is analysed as rational and straightforward process rather than as a development characterised by bounded rationality, power and politics, cultural norms and constructs, etc. – is, however, not alleviated.

4. Projectification as cultural and discursive processes: Broad conceptualisations

The broad conceptualisation of projectification involves the cultural and discursive societal processes whereby projects and project-like circumstances are institutionalised in individual lives, the organising of all sorts of work, and society at large. Unlike the definition by Maylor
et al (2006) of ‘societal projectification’ this broad view is not a mere extension of the study of the implementation of project-based structures beyond firms and their immediate supply chain networks, but rather a different theoretical view in which formal structural units are seen as institutionalised social constructions and not as stable entities. It is a conceptualisation that draws on sociological understandings of an increasingly episodic orientation in contemporary society (cf. Bennis and Slater, 1968; Sennett, 1998), project-oriented discursive modes of justification (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002), but also on the tendency to perceive all sorts of individual and societal processes as temporary and transitory by nature:

“Many observers have noted the contemporary decay in production of thoroughgoing literary Utopias (in sharp contrast with the ferment of the 18th and 19th centuries), and their replacement by satirical or polemical versions of life in the mass society of the future (e.g., Orwell’s 1984); what has gone unremarked is the enormous proliferation of short-term quasi-Utopias of all sorts – conferences, meetings, “task forces,” research projects, experiments, training exercises. It is as if we have traded the grand visions of social life as it might be lived for miniature societies, to which one can become committed intensively, meaningfully, satisfyingly – and impermanently.” (Miles, 1964: pp. 465)

In their discussion on cultural and political modes of understanding and justifying reality through the history of mankind, Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) claim that a new ‘justificatory regime’ is emerging in contemporary society – the project-oriented cité. As compared to the six historical cités - which were based in, e.g., religious beliefs, bourgeois civil society values, industrial logics or market mechanisms – the project-oriented justificatory regime puts primacy on activity, project initiation and social networks as basic tenets of societal activity. The successful and prosperous individual is an adaptive, flexible and connective team player – able to generate enthusiasm and handle multiple cultural traditions – always prioritising availability, employability and new projects over social stability and lifelong plans (cf. also Bennis and Slater, 1968; Lindgren et al, 2001).

“In contrast with the Industrial Cité in which activity means ‘work’ and being active means ‘holding a steady and wage-earning position’, in the Project-oriented Cité
activity overcomes the oppositions between work and non-work, steady and casual, paid and unpaid, profit-sharing and volunteer work. Life is conceived as a series of projects, the more they differ from one another, the more valuable they are. What is relevant is to be always pursuing some sort of activity, never to be without a project, without ideas, to be always looking forward to, and preparing for, something along with other persons, who are brought together by the drive for activity. When starting on a new project, all participants know that it will be short-lived. The perspective of an unavoidable and desirable end is built in the nature of the involvement, without curtailing the enthusiasm of the participants. Projects are well adapted to networking for the very reason that they are transitory forms: the succession of projects, by multiplying connections and increasing the number of ties, results in an expansion of networks. (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002: 192)

Beyond the notion of projects as a core aspect of contemporary societal life, projectification is also discursively linked to the strong and dominating notion of project management as a standardised field of codified knowledge (cf. Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007). By naming something as a ‘project’, a number of discursive expectations on the work process are brought from the well-established project management discipline into the local situation by project participants (Pellegrinelli, 2010). Projects are usually expected to be planned, controlled, detached episodes of passion, dedication and commitment – as arenas for flexible action and task-focussed social relations (Nocker, 2009), as strictly coordinated and enclosed activity systems (Bechky, 2006). They are also constructed as exceptional work episodes, as temporary ‘states of emergency’ where danger and urgency prevail and everyday norms and rules do not apply (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006a; Lindahl, 2007) – and, hence, as extraordinary settings in which individuals subjugate to almost any kind of conditions as it is a passing moment only. The labelling of projects is also closely related to reification (Cicmil et al, 2006) – that ‘a project’ is often compartmentalised by its co-constructors into an independent and distinct object that is controllable and manageable if proper methodologies are used. The inherent performativity of the project concept (Pellegrinelli, 2010; Sage et al, 2013), with its emphasis on rationality and controlled passion, can thus be expected to be an important aspect of understanding projectification.
The processes and consequences of projectification have been increasingly studied in this fashion during the past decade (cf. Lindgren et al, 2001; Sahlin-Andersson, 2002; Grabher, 2002a; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Cicmil et al, 2009). This research has emphasised the need for examining the underlying discursive developments in which the notion of rational project management has become a legitimate and desirable phenomenon in contemporary society and a driver behind the creation of projectified organisations within which the work occurs. Among the themes of these studies we find, e.g., the (re-)masculinisation of post-bureaucratic work practices (Gill, 2002; Buckle and Thomas, 2003; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006a; Styhre, 2011), the performative notion of project management as creeping into established professional identities (Hodgson, 2002; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007; Paton et al, 2010), and the construction of new power relations in the wake of standardisation and professional certification initiatives (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007). The project management discourse thus contributes to the reification of projects as distinct, given, unquestionable and manageable items separated from their history and context, (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006); to the dichotomisation of projects vis-à-vis permanent and stable organisational arrangements, (Cicmil et al, 2009); to the grandiosification of projects as a superior alternative to ineffective, rigid, boring bureaucracies, (Gill, 2002; Grabher, 2002a); and to the compartmentalisation of projects into settings in which admirable achievements take place under conditions where normal rules do not apply (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006a; Lindahl, 2007). Some recent research also highlights the emotional consequences of the projectified work, portraying projects as emotionally charged and potentially addictive and harmful spaces (Rehn and Lindahl, 2011; Rowlands and Handy, 2012).

Among the consequences of projectification it is also important to note the ambitions and hopes tied to projects without exception and how such ambitions and hopes have become taken-for-granted in project work. Through goal-setting and planning, ambitions and hopes are projected into the future – almost to the extent that the future is ‘lived’ in advance, taken for granted and secured through project planning (Pitsis et al, 2003). Being successful in a projectified society is closely linked to being available, flexible and connected, while sacrificing lifelong plans, stable conditions and social predictability (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). Invoking the project discourse thus also imply the exclusion and the suppression of
non-project aspects, but also the disconnecting of everything that does not fit into the project management discourse.

To sum this up, the broad conceptualisation of projectification includes the focus on organisational restructuring in the narrow view, but extends the notion of projectification into societal and individual life and employ cultural, sociological and critical theoretical perspectives in the analysis of processes and consequences thereof. It implies that the increased prevalence of projects and project management processes in organisations is not only analysed from the perspective of rational structural responses to competitive and technological changes, but is also set in a cultural and discursive context in which notions of projects and project management are central to societal development in general. We will now move on to illustrate how these insights can be made useful in the study of projectification in practice.

5. Applying narrow and broad views of projectification: An empirical illustration

In this section we will return to some of our earlier research on projectification processes in order to illustrate how a broad conceptualisation of may contribute to knowledge and theory development. In the particular study revisited here, we took an interest in the consequences of increased project-orientation in organisations (cf. Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006a; 2006b; 2007, 2008, 2009). A range of organisations within ICT consulting and performing arts were studied by means of interviews with project-working individuals who were members of the same project teams. This implied that individuals were asked for their spontaneous story on their life including both work and life in general during the implementation time of their respective projects. Interviews lasted for about two-three hours with each person. After typewriting the tape-recorded material, we extracted different narratives linked to aspects of projectification by means of thematic analysis. Inspired by Martin’s (2001) method we have thus emphasised narratives concerning the production and re-production of the project work form, the invocation of project management discourses, how the individuals relate their way of living to what happens in ‘projects’, and the dynamic relations between organisation and ‘projects’.
It appeared that all the studied organisations experienced similar problems in the wake of their on-going projectification, usually manifesting in individual stress, delays and budget overruns in projects, and a lack of overview of the project portfolio. Integrating the various problems into a model of on-going projectification (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2008), we found that they were indeed related and tended to sustain each other over time. We summarised this in terms of an ‘evil cycle of projectification’ (see Figure 1), that is basically built from a narrow conceptualisation.

![Evil cycle of projectification](image)

Figure 1: Evil cycle of projectification, narrow-view analysis (adapted from Lindgren and Packendorff, 2008: 55).

According to the narrow-view analysis, the legacy of neglecting capacity issues in project-based environments (stage A) is reflected in an attitude that additional projects can always be added and that starting a project earlier will imply that it is also delivered earlier (B). When adding projects to the portfolio, it is usually possible both to identify individuals who have some spare time to take on additional tasks (C). A usual consequence of this is delays and budget overruns in project implementation (D), as it now appears that organisational capacity was indeed lacking in terms of overload and managerial attention. Due to improvisational measures and fire-fighting, most projects are still delivering in a satisfying
manner (E) and the impediments for learning and improvement thus remain too significant for the basic lack of understanding concerning organisational capacity to be alleviated (A). The measures taken in the organisations studied included support and anti-stress training for employees, increased emphasis on leadership and control in the individual projects, and the introduction of project portfolio management models. Still, the basic problems tended to persist.

This narrow view analysis of the processes of projectification reveals not only the incremental and stepwise manner in which the project form is granted primacy in organisations (cf. Jerbrant, 2013), but also that the project-based organisations may well become subject to inertia and bureaucratisation (cf. also Hodgson, 2004). Processes of projectification imply not only that operations are split up into flexible and innovative units, but also that several aspects of repetitive organising that could be beneficial also in project-based settings are left behind. In this case, we find not only the well-known tendency to overlook issues related to capacity and load in project work (cf. Wheelwright and Clark, 1992), but also an absence of HRM in project situations (Bredin and Söderlund, 2006), a neglect of the additional pressures on employees caused by organisational complexity and multiple deadlines (cf. Turner et al, 2008; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2009), and a lack of insight into the operational risks related to a reliance on heroic action. In the cases studied here, the notion of projects serves not only to structure operations in a dynamic and flexible manner, but also to transfer responsibility and accountability from managers to teams and individuals without offering relevant organisational infrastructures or resources. From this narrow analysis of projectification, we can thus identify several important aspects of problematic organisational restructurings and point at possible ways of resolving them. At the same time, it was clear to us that many of these problems were already well known among managers and employees in the studied organisations, but that almost no one could imagine an alternative way of organising project-based work. As noted by the ICT consultant Carl and his project leader Eric:

“The salespersons will always promise the customers quicker and cheaper projects than possible. They will always make them believe that we will fix their problems through a fast
installation of our software, but in practice, we always have to make far-reaching modifications. And those modifications mean delays. When the project schedule cracks down, we just have to sit there with our extra hours. It has been like that in almost all my projects.” (Carl)

“Well, you don’t actually plan for that kind of work peaks. When you make a time schedule, you estimate the duration of each work package and then add some slack. You don’t plan for any bigger problems. No projects go exactly as planned and you don’t know everything from start. But if you were to investigate and estimate everything beforehand, you would never come to the implementation phase.” (Eric)

In order to understand how the various actors tend to be repetitively caught up in such situations, a broad notion of projectification can be employed, whereby the actions taken is seen as internalising cultural values and invoking performative discourses on projects and project management. From such a perspective (Figure 2), general discursive notions of projects as temporary, extraordinary, adventurous, controllable and delimited are drawn upon in work episodes labelled ‘projects’. Extraordinarisation implies a discursive view of all projects as more or less unique, thus not really possible to handle together in a fully integrated manner. This is supported by a notion of projects as temporary that spills over to a view of project work as temporary, optimistically framed as opportunities that cannot be missed. People justify their subjugation to such conditions by drawing upon project-orientation in constructing their identities – performing as flexible, innovative, dedicated professionals. When problems appear they may question the number of simultaneous projects, thereby reducing the situation to a matter of planning – i.e., understanding the situation as requiring even more project planning rather than questioning the processes of extraordinarisation and temporarisation. The endured hardships are then again compartmentalised as isolated mistakes and as instances of heroic action that created some sense of meaningfulness and excitement. When actors frame their work in such a way and take this way of working for granted and inevitable, project work and its consequences will be justified as normal and necessary and thus sustained over time.
At the same time, other notions appeared as suppressed and sometimes non-existent, such as repetitiveness (people and organisations live through series of projects, not in one project only), normalisation (project work is and should be seen as everyday things in these contexts), resilience (awareness of the limits of heroic masculinity is needed), risk (project risks and deviations cannot be fully controlled) and inter-relatedness (projects are related to each other and to the rest of the organisation throughout their existence). It can thus be concluded that the problems identified and their sustenance may depend upon invoking project management in a traditional and non-reflective way, and that some of the measures taken may actually aggravate the situation as they also are built upon traditional notions.

Through this brief illustration we claim that a broad conceptualisation of projectification offers a better understanding of its reasons, as well as new ways of explaining the persistence and sustenance of project-based work forms despite their problematic consequences. Projectification is not only driven by notions of suitability and effectiveness for certain organisational tasks, but also by the widespread legitimacy of project management as a rational managerial toolbox and project-orientation as an internalised understanding of what it means to be a successful, productive and enterprising individual in
contemporary society. At the same time, it should be noted that this broad understanding is not external to narrow conceptualisations and understanding of projectification, it rather builds on them and include them, but with different ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions as points of departure. It also implies that new ways of formulating and resolving consequences of projectification can be identified (Spicer et al, 2009). For example, the broad conceptualisation offers new ways of attending to unwanted and problematic consequences of organisational projectification as identified through research employing narrow conceptualisations; by rephrasing problems with overload, stress or high project failure rates into problems related to institutionalised over-optimism, responsibilisation of individuals and expectation of omnipotence in project control, focus can be moved to organisational cultures and management ideologies as sources of improvement instead of project maturity models and control systems.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that an increased focus on the processes of projectification in would be beneficial to project research. By introducing the distinction between narrow and broad conceptualisations of projectification, we have extended this research area from its current concern with the increased primacy of projects in contemporary organisational structures (cf. Maylor et al, 2006) into an interest for cultural and discursive processes in society in which notions of projects are invoked. What separate the two conceptualisations are not the levels or units of analysis, but instead underlying research interests and assumptions.

Based on this, we propose that future research on projectification should actively employ a view of projects and project-based organising as cultural and discursive phenomena. Thereby, we will not only be able to add to our knowledge on how project-based work is organised in everyday practice, but also increase our understanding of how societal discourse, organisational culture and individual identity construction are inter-related in the reproduction of project work in specific and post-bureaucratic organising in general. We will also receive awareness not only of the full consequences of project-based work practices,
but also of possible ways of attending to these consequences in a critical and constructive way.

The study of projectification is not a matter for project researchers alone. Organisation theory scholars interested in ‘bringing work back in’ in enhancing understandings of contemporary organisational matters (cf. Barley and Kunda, 2001) should find studies of projectification most useful in developing new theoretical notions on, e.g., post-bureaucratic organisations, virtual organisations, entrepreneurial processes, the organising of innovation work, new leadership forms, new HRM practices and so forth. When work processes, complex tasks, long-term change work and life itself are increasingly treated as instances of project management – what happens, who benefits, what power structures emerge? Are we experiencing a shift towards post-bureaucratic organising, or is it better understood as re-bureaucratisation at different levels of analysis? What about projects as outbursts of emotional labour, as projections of desire and hope rather than as rationally planned activity systems? In addition to this, work–life problems in projectified work need continued attention, as well as related issues of leadership and followership, of entrepreneurship and innovation. Project research has an important role to play in such a development.
References


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