

The project (management) discourse and its consequences: on vulnerability and unsustainability in project-based work

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In this paper, we examine how the discourses related to project-based work and management are drawn upon in the organising of contemporary work, and the implications they have for project workers. We are interested in how project workers and projectified organisations become vulnerable to decline, decay and exhaustion and why they continue to participate in, and so sustain, projectification processes. The critical perspective taken here, in combination with our empirical material from the ICT sector, surfaces an irreversible decline of the coping capacity of project workers and draws attention to the addictive perception of resilience imposed on and internalised by them as a condition of success and longevity. Under those circumstances, resilience is made sense of and internalised as coping with vulnerability by letting some elements of life being destroyed; thus re-emerging as existentially vulnerable rather than avoiding or resisting the structures and processes that perpetuate vulnerability.

Keywords: critical sustainability, projectification, vulnerability, project-based work, resilience.

Introduction

In this paper, we examine how the discourses related to projects and project management are drawn upon in the organising of contemporary work, and the implications they have for project workers. Inspired by some critical debates around vulnerability and resilience from current research broadly related to ecological crisis and sustainability, we analyse the consequences of the prevailing project rationality in the form of projectification processes (Midler, 1995; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009b; Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014).

Projects have emerged as a central aspect of organisational life in recent decades (Ekstedt *et al.*, 1999), supported by a well-established set of Systems Theory-derived, ICT-mediated, managerial tools and well-organised professional communities (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007). The discourse of projects and project

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management (PM) has grown strong and is present in all sectors of society, defining desirable ways of working and living as well as articulating the character of successful and effective social interaction in modern capitalism (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). It centres around the proclaimed need for rational planning and control in order to secure successful delivery of intended outcomes—promoting the project as the entity of interest, with its effectiveness as the main ambition, and instrumental/prescriptive rationality as the way to create new knowledge (Morris, 2013). As such, it appeals to organisational decision makers globally.

During recent years, the project management discourse has been subject to a series of critical studies scrutinising the greyer and oppressive aspects of the discourse as well as its consequences (cf. Hodgson, 2002; Buckle and Thomas, 2003; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009b; Paton *et al.*, 2013; Lindgren *et al.*, 2014). These studies have clearly exposed some potentially unsustainable aspects of project-based work for organisations and individuals such as stressful work situations, internalisation of project management models and tools, subjugation to unrealistic plans and deadlines and a focus on each individual project rather than on organisational and individual long-term coping with a project-based work-life. As a product of technological, social, economic and political forces and human agendas, project basing changes the relationships people have with work, life and co-workers (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007; Lindgren *et al.*, 2014; Lundin *et al.*, 2015; Peticca-Harris *et al.*, 2015).

In this paper, we suggest that project discourses may have more far-reaching existential consequences for project workers and their organisations than this. As noted e.g. by Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) and Araújo (2009), a work-life framed as consisting of temporary assignments, temporary relations and recurrent performance evaluations may also be a work-life in which nothing is stable, nothing and no one is reliable, in which professional reputations, performances and senses of personal worthiness are repeatedly challenged and may be lost. Project-based work can create conditions that are hard to cope with, hard to justify, hard to control—despite the grand promise of project management to deliver the reasonable, the rational and the controllable. A critical concept of *vulnerability*, as suggested in some emerging sustainability research (Gear, 2011; Fineman and Gear, 2013) offers an appealing theoretical platform for the argument that the processes of global capitalism that underpin the contemporary world order (projects and projectification being one of its products) not only expose us to external environmental risks and insecurities (Kirby, 2011; Rajan, 2011) but inevitably involve us, as more or less powerful co-constructors, in conditions in which our very being is seen as under constant threat (Skoglund, 2015). By invoking the discursive notion of project management in daily work, we may not only involve ourselves in potentially harmful working conditions, we may also live and work as if past achievements, relations and performances can never be relied upon in the future. Our capacity for *resilience*—i.e. handling or living with this vulnerability without complete breakdown—will thus be central for understanding the consequences of the project discourse.

We are intrigued by how project workers and projectified organisations become vulnerable to decline, decay and exhaustion. Why do they continue to participate in, and so sustain, projectification discourse and processes? What resistance and which restorative actions may be possible? We suggest that projectification is a complex ethical problem with consequences for long-term sustainability of organisations and society. It may expose workers, individually and collectively, to vulnerable situations that might in the long run consume available resources and diminish their adaptive capacity rendering the organisation unsustainable.

Our aim in this paper is to argue that the discursive projectification of work-life may not only expose people to unsustainable working conditions in terms of deadline stress and overload but also contribute to their declining senses of progress, hope and personal worthiness—that is, their existential vulnerability. We also suggest that this gives rise to a specific neoliberal notion of resilience, which

entails project workers' progressive subjugation to a permanent state of exception. Existential exposure to the unwanted consequences of projectification is internalised as a failure or lack of capability to cope and adapt to a mode of work, which is hailed as a source of ambition and success. Resilience is imagined as trying even harder to cope and adapt, to make a virtue of the exception—rather than resisting it and invoking other work-life-related discourses.

The paper continues as follows. First, the project discourse is introduced and its dominant rational ethos and potentially suppressed consequences are explored. Then, a critical sustainability perspective on organisational analysis is outlined, centring on vulnerability and resilience as the core conceptual resources in the study of projectification processes and their consequences. This perspective encourages the analysis of existential exposure, warns about finiteness of resources, problematises the notion of resilience, and raises moral/ethical dilemmas in organisational processes and contemporary work practices. Our analysis draws on illustrative empirical material from our earlier research in the ICT sector. The paper ends by a discussion of vulnerability and unsustainability emanating from the construction and reproduction of the dominant project/PM discourse in contemporary work organisations, followed by some theoretical propositions for further research towards safer, more sustainable and existentially less vulnerable work conditions.

The project (management) discourse: Rational ethos and suppressed consequences

Our point of departure is the claim that projects and project management have become central discursive constructs of contemporary capitalist society upon which individuals draw in their organising of daily life (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Hodgson, 2004). As a practical and scholarly discourse, project management is an integral part of the modernist, technicist and rationalist views of management that came to characterise the social sciences after World War II (Packendorff, 1995; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009b). Gradually, project management has been, in professional circles, declared as indispensable for business results (Andrews, 2011) with its proclaimed potential to respond to a variety of external pressures by handling them in distinct, delimited work packages, using tried and tested proprietary tools and techniques for planning, control, multiparty collaboration, team-building and delivery against uncertainty (Morris, 2013). The widespread diffusion and acceptance of this discourse takes place far outside academic institutions due to the establishment of global international standards owned and maintained by large professional organizations such as PMI (Project Management Institute) and IPMA (International Project Management Association) but also is celebrated and inscribed in all sorts of work regulations in contemporary business corporations.

Not surprisingly, life in organisations is today becoming increasingly 'projectified' with a widespread tendency to manage and organise all sorts of activities by projects (Maylor *et al.*, 2006) and to make sense of everyday work-life in terms of projects (Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014). Projects, as goal-oriented ambitions of individuals and groups, reinforce instrumentalisation and masculinisation of life, and they have come to be seen as predominant life-defining and personal worth justifying engagements (Peticca-Harris *et al.*, 2015). This is also carried over to society in general, as a tendency to perceive more and more aspects of life in terms of achievement-driven, delimited, temporary courses of action (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Knights, 2006; Gaggiotti *et al.*, 2011). This applies to both explicit projects (i.e. events labelled as such) and to implicit ones.

The elements of this project management discourse, which is drawn upon in daily project work and thus sustained over time, together with some illustrations from the related extant literature, are summarised in Table 1. It shall be noted that the differences between the dominant/mainstream and suppressed/critical literatures are not always as clear-cut as a two-column table might lead one to believe.

Critical studies of projects/PM have also illuminated significant but potentially suppressed existential consequences of the project discourse for people involved (right-hand column, Table 1). The big discursive promise of project management is sustained by and also (more implicitly) used as a justification for dedication and addiction to work (Rowlands and Handy, 2012). As a result, tasks and work tend to invade, and even take over, people's lives (Andersson and Wickelgren, 2009). In contrast to the post-bureaucratic ethos, project-based companies do employ (Taylorist) labour control strategies aiming at improving human performance, labour utilisation and productivity (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Gleadle *et al.*, 2012; Peticca-Harris *et al.*, 2015). Project management technologies appear to have a disciplinary power which 'permits greater visibility and calculability of human movement and action and this facilitates managerial control' (Metcalf, 1997 p.314)—project team members retain control over how they do the work, but they are severely restricted in terms of what they do and when (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006). For example, projectification often tends to result in rebureaucratisation rather than procedural freedom (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Räsänen and Linde, 2004; Hodgson, 2005), control rather than trust (Hodgson, 2004), masculinisation rather than feminisation (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Styhre, 2011), and short-term delusion rather than long-term usefulness (Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2003). Success and prosperity in the projectified society become closely linked to being available, flexible and connected, while sacrificing lifelong plans, stable conditions and social predictability (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Araújo, 2009).

Projectification as a cyclical discursive process

At this junction, it is opportune to pose and ask why people continue to participate in, and so sustain, projectification processes despite the damaging consequences and disenchantment? Drawing on the extant critical research, including Table 1 and particularly on the recent work of Packendorff and Lindgren (2014), projectification is in Figure 1 captured as a circular process of reinforcement of the project discourse. This process is sustained not only by continuous reaffirmation of the dominant aspects of the discourse but also through the suppression of certain subjective existential experiences of project workers and managers. We have tentatively labelled the characteristics of this process as: *Dependence on great expectations, follies and sensations; Commitment to blank sheets, fresh starts and 'professional' performance; internalisation of honour/shame and personal worthiness; and exhaustion, finiteness and the end of resilience.* These are discussed in the remainder of this section.

Dependence on great expectations, follies and sensations

In their quest for a 'broad' conceptualisation of projectification, Packendorff and Lindgren (2014) show that projectification, conceived as a product of a widely-spread and colonising PM discourse, promotes a particular meaning of success, achievement and creativity, and results in organisational members engaging in project working on a regular basis, in a circular, prolonged and intense manner. The key to securing success in implementing new ideas is to carefully plan for them in advance to construct each project as a structured attempt at conducting controlled experiments. By framing on ongoing operations in terms of a series of distinct projects, as opportunities to start anew, one may keep the danger of inertia and stagnating professional development at bay.

Commitment to 'blank sheets', new starts and professional performance

This element is related to the great expectations and the risky reliance on the long-term benefits that a project can deliver—i.e. the hope that a project may serve

Table 1: Elements of the dominant project management discourse and potential suppressed aspects

Discursive elements	The promise of the dominant project discourse (illustrations from project management literatures)	Suppressed but likely subjective experiences (illustrations from critical project studies literatures)
Rationality and goal focus	Well-planned work efforts directed at linear progression towards a well-defined set of outcomes (Morris, 2013)	Ill-planned, over-optimistic work planning causes deadline stress, anxiety and overload. Goal formulations often vague or incorrect. Projects as 'martial law' incidents where normal rules do not apply (Lindahl, 2007; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2009)
Adventure	Projection of ambitions, dreams and hopes into specific and well-defined sequences of action; channelling of ideas and visions into work packages which allows professional freedom and creativity; yielding satisfaction, pride and aesthetic fulfilment (Sahlin-Andersson, 2002; Clegg <i>et al.</i> , 2006)	Projects experienced as potentially damaging but addictive experiences of risk; requiring total focus and often lacking organisational relevance (Andersson and Wickelgren, 2009; Rowlands and Handy, 2012; Peticca-Harris <i>et al.</i> , 2015)
Beneficial outcomes (changing an unsatisfactory state to a better state)	Serious strategic intent, guaranteed commitment to the delivering of benefits—individual and collective (Checkland, 2009, p:xxi) visionary leaps into the unknown; 'future perfect' (Clegg <i>et al.</i> , 2006)	Confusion and disenchantment due to opportunistic behaviour based on power asymmetries; failures being glossed over discursively (Drummond, 1999; Fincham, 2002; Flyvbjerg, 2008)
Temporal disconnection and task compartmentalisation	Placing the project into a distinct time frame. Construction of project tasks as discrete, manageable sequences of action (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995)	Project 'boundaries' experienced as highly permeable, close inter-relations with other projects and units, suppressed sense of history/temporality, past-present-future connection (Yeow, 2014)
Planning	Securing success in implementing project intent by carefully planning in advance (Pinto and Mantel, 1990). Explicit means–ends rationality expressed in a time schedule aimed at moving the project forward (Morris, 2013)	Plans often constructed to get projects approved in political decision processes (Brunsson, 1989; Flyvbjerg <i>et al.</i> , 2003) with little input from, or possibility to be questioned by, project managers and project workers (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006)

Continued

Table 1: *Continued*

Discursive elements	The promise of the dominant project discourse (illustrations from project management literatures)	Suppressed but likely subjective experiences (illustrations from critical project studies literatures)
Controllability	Project execution can and shall be closely monitored, risks analysed and monitored, exceptions detected and corrected (Pinto and Mantel, 1990)	Projects sometimes go out of control, risks neglected, improvisation needed. Internalisation of responsibility for time and task planning (Hodgson, 2004; Lindahl, 2007). Projects as instances of increased surveillance and decreasing autonomy (Gleadle <i>et al.</i> , 2012)
Delivery and 'closure'	Finalisation of accomplishments potentially yielding satisfaction, pride and fulfilment (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995)	Delivery as a compromise with results and outcomes reconstructed in political processes (Fincham, 2002; Sage <i>et al.</i> , 2013)
Superiority and distinctiveness of the project form	Projects as structural and appreciated opposites to ordinary, bureaucratic operations (Maylor <i>et al.</i> , 2006)	Projects as bureaucratised sequences of action (Hodgson, 2005) within standardised stage gate models (Räisänen and Linde, 2004)
Professionalism	Professional conduct and knowledge expected and will contribute to successful outcomes. Project management as an efficiency-oriented discipline, aspiring profession and identity base. Project management as necessary skill in contemporary business life. (Morris, 2013)	Career concerns important for project managers. Project work as an arena to display professionalism (Hodgson, 2002). May collide with other professional identities (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007; Paton <i>et al.</i> , 2013)

as a turning point in life, a stepping-stone in the career, the creative solution to an everlasting problem or the long-wanted professional fulfilment. Professional project management is a performance in which the project worker puts her/his personal qualities of handling unknown futures, polyvalence, a multitude of relations (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002) on display while trying to break free from stagnation. The hope that historical and cultural contexts do not matter, that excellence is innate, that one may break free from one's past, are highly related to the notion of the independent and autonomous project and are usually not acceptable or even imaginable in other spaces (Lindgren *et al.*, 2014). The progressive institutionalisation of expectations on how to think and behave as a professional, a colleague, a manager, an organisational member (Hodgson, 2002; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2014) gradually perpetuates a work culture in which voluntarily (enthusiastically) committing to project plans becomes a taken-for-granted

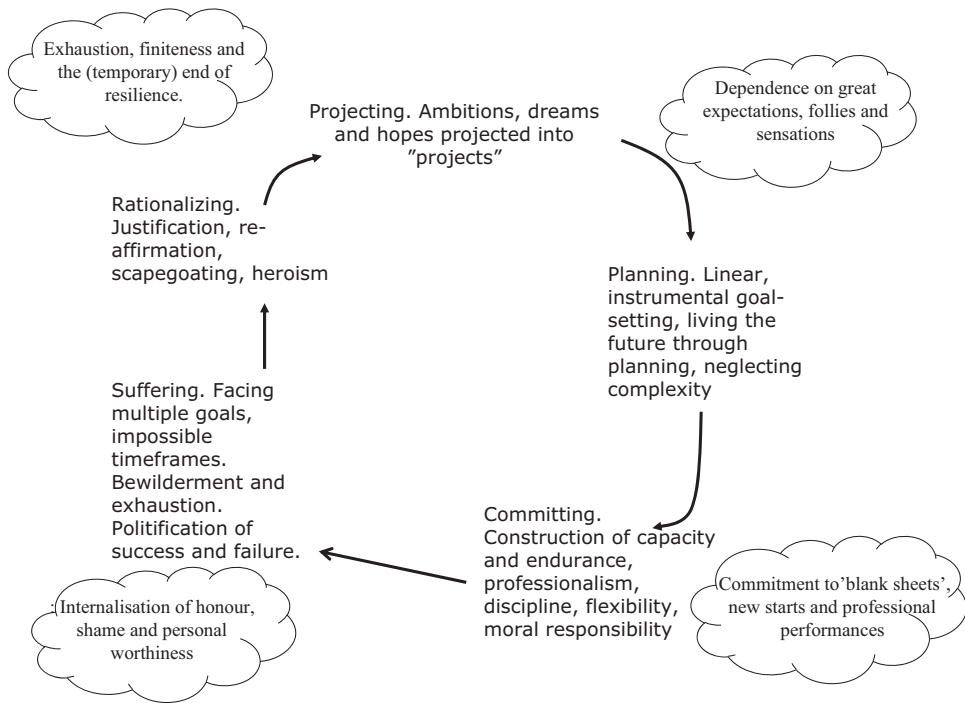


Figure 1: Projectification as a circular process of invoking elements of the project discourse, including potential suppressed consequences. Adapted and developed from Packendorff and Lindgren (2014), p. 17.

necessity for anyone wanting to stay and prosper in the organisation. At the same time, there is also an awareness of a price to be paid—a project represents a commitment made where resources do not always match responsibilities and where extraordinary efforts are required (Rowlands and Handy, 2012).

Internalisation of honour/shame and personal worthiness

In this process of drawing on and subduing to project management discourse, failures and deviations are suppressed and sometimes neglected aspects (Lindahl and Rehn, 2007). Plans and expectations tend to fall short, leaving their followers with a sense of having deceived themselves and others. Project work becomes, in that sense, a matter of constructing and handling honour and shame (Rehn and Lindahl, 2011). Similar to managerial work, project work does not only require long hours but also a readiness on behalf of the individual to work extra hours at short notice (cf Kunda, 1992; Nandhakumar and Jones, 2001). Given such work intensity, there is no time for long-term personal development and many feel inadequate (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Peticca-Harris *et al.*, 2015). However, any resistance to such working conditions may be seen as illegitimate, unnecessary and even as an example of poor individual performance (Hodgson, 2002; Rowlands and Handy, 2012).

Exhaustion, finiteness and the end of resilience

At some point, an awareness of conflicting goals, impossible time frames, finiteness of resources, unattainable requirements start to appear. People start to talk

about work overload, fading dreams, never being able to perform as well as they want, never feeling that they are good enough, always carrying some degree of shame for not delivering or for violating their own professional standards (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007). For some, this is also experienced as harmful to the individuals themselves—in terms of physical and mental health, in terms of relations and social connectivity (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Peticca-Harris *et al.*, 2015). Motivation and enthusiasm cannot be upheld which leads to disasters, crises, underperformance and exhaustion. What still often happens is that the endured hardships are justified in various ways through post hoc rationalisation and post-project catharsis—that is, the feeling of satisfaction and pride of having persisted in solving a creative work challenge and survived (Ó'Riain, 2001). The organisation and its administrative resources are kept at bay and it is up to the project team to solve the emerging problems by themselves without complaining or showing weakness by asking for help. Heroism is also on display in the sense that one or more heroes emerge as rescuers, the ones who see the project and membership in it as worth the temporary sacrifice, thus pursuing the commitments made. Through the heroic deeds, the most serious delivery problems are still avoided in the end, and the project form is (re)framed as still being an adequate way of handling similar tasks (Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014). A related dilemma is also the elusive nature of project success and failure (Sage *et al.*, 2013). Who is being sacrificed, who takes the glory—is both an ethical dilemma of accountability and a political issue (Fincham, 2002). In the end, post hoc rationalisation and catharsis imply that current work practices are confirmed and sustained, and that resistance is futile.

In summary, Figure 1 represents a circular nature of 'projectification' as a discursive practice serving as an useful conceptual framework of the marginalised subjective experiences associated with the project processes and structures. It refocuses attention on the dangers of exhaustion, disenchantment and unsustainability of project-based work in the long run. We now invoke a selection of related critical theoretical concepts of vulnerability and unsustainability before presenting an empirical analysis of project practitioners' relevant lived experiences.

A lasting state of crisis: vulnerability, resilience and unsustainability

In this section, a critical sustainability perspective on organisational analysis is outlined, centring on *vulnerability* and *resilience* as the core conceptual resources in this study of projectification processes and their consequences. *Vulnerability* has been variously defined as being concerned with the susceptibility of an individual or a system to risk (Kirby, 2011); the exposure of individuals and communities to environmental insecurity as the provisioning capacity of the environment is impaired (Rajan, 2011); and the quintessential 'openness' of corporeality itself (Gear, 2011), inevitably 'being thrown-in and exposed to the draughts of the world' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2011, p.6). As noted by Butler (2004), the Western ethos of the rational and autonomous citizen expose us to fundamental vulnerability as it "fails to do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, and implicate us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally, irreversibly." (p. 20). The concept of vulnerability, according to some, is central not only to an understanding of individual exposure to social structures and processes but also of the interconnectedness between the individual body and these structures and processes (cf Butler, 2004). Moreover, it has begun to be theorised in more general terms as a critical normative thesis addressing the perceived shortcomings of the operative traditional assumptions of mainstream liberal political and legal theory (Fineman and Gear, 2013). Concerned with social and organisational developments, these literatures directly address issues of power asymmetries and finiteness of commitment, social institutions and organisational resources. In an attempt to reorient the focus from a

problematic and increasingly reified ideal of 'sustainability' to the complex moral-ethical problem of 'unsustainability' and its roots, critical sustainability scholars (e.g., Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; Banerjee, 2003; Evans, 2010; Curry, 2011; Grear, 2011) have prioritised the consideration of the underlying power structures that have over time resulted in an unsustainable world. Unsustainability is then understood as a state of *vulnerability* where adaptation to circumstances is no longer possible due to power asymmetries, exhaustion of resources and a lack of ethical considerations and social activism (Thompson, 2007).

By focusing on the notion of unsustainability, it is also possible to critically question the notion of 'resilience' which is mainly concerned with coping with vulnerability rather than assuming that vulnerability can be effectively handled and avoided. Resilience, that is '*the ability to recover from, or resist being affected by, setback, illness etc*' (Kirby, 2011, p;103), comes from resources in the form of advantages or coping mechanisms that cushion us in the face of misfortune, disaster and violence by lessening, ameliorating and compensating for vulnerability. However, as Evans and Reid (2013) scrutinise the resilience turn in security and government thinking, they argue that resilience is a neo-liberal construct which promotes a lasting crisis where the purpose of the human subject is reduced to survivability and '*adaptability so that life may go on living although the fact that elements of it may be destroyed.*' (Evans and Reid, 2013, p.84). They say:

Resilience is premised upon the ability of the vulnerable subject to continually re-emerge from the conditions of its ongoing emergency. Life quite literally becomes a series of dangerous events. Its biography becomes a story of non-linear reactions to dangers that continually defy any attempt on its behalf to impress time with purpose and meaning. As the resilient subject navigates its ways across the complex, unknowable and forever dangerous landscapes that define the topos of contemporary politics, so the dangerousness of life becomes its condition of possibility rather than its threat. In a certain sense, the resilient subject thrives on danger (Evans and Reid, 2013, p. 87).

Evans and Reid thus conclude that a belief in the necessity and positivity of human exposure to danger, while experiencing and accepting a permanent *state of exception*, is fundamental to the new doctrine of 'resilience'. To increase its resilience, in other words, the subject must disavow any belief in the possibility to secure itself through resistance and accept, instead, an understanding of life as a permanent '*process of continual adaptation to threats and dangers which are said to be outside its control.*' (Evans and Reid, 2013, p.85) Resistance here refers to the ability of individuals and people to avoid suffering adverse effects by securing themselves from the difficulties they are faced with, ultimately implying a political capacity aimed at the achievement of freedom from that which threatens and endangers.

The extant but still sparse literatures making use of sustainability concepts in organisational analysis are well consistent with dominant notions of sustainability in environmental research, emphasising the technical aspects of problems and instrumental rationality as the way forward (Skoglund, 2015). They suggest that sustainability and resilience are desirable features of work and organising—in the sense that work and organising practices should be designed in a way that prevents stress and burnout and sustains organisational capacity for adaptation and renewal (Docherty *et al.*, 2008; Kira and van Eljnatten, 2010; Pfeffer, 2010). Framing the problem as a contradiction between today's *intensive work systems* and the desired *sustainable work systems*, these scholars argue that work intensification has implied increased time pressures, rebureaucratisation of organisations and work/life imbalances. While acknowledging the contributions made in this literatures, we suggest that it is important to remember that the concept of 'sustainability' is not a neutral, rational or apolitical one; 'sustainability issues' are always linked to, and reflect, power asymmetries in balancing the capitalist pursuit of unlimited growth with the need for a healthy life-supporting ecosystem (Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; Banerjee,

2003; Curry, 2011). The problem with the studies employing sustainability concepts in organisational analysis is, therefore, the same as with the general literatures on sustainability: they lack an underlying understanding of how rationalist and managerialist discourses operate in social life, and thus neglect that established systems of power and domination impose severe limitations to what is possible to do or achieve (Banerjee, 2003). Analysing and resolving problems in workplaces is not only a matter of rational evaluation but also identifying solutions that are effective for all involved actors takes place in a discursive setting that lends primacy to certain ways of identifying and viewing these problems (du Gay *et al.*, 1986).

To sum this up, our suggested conceptual framework for organisational analysis revolves around the notions of fundamental vulnerability, unsustainability and resilience, seen as constructed and reconstructed in discursive settings. In the study reported here, we suggest that the notion of 'projects' constitutes such a discursive setting, promoting a certain way of framing work as desirable and legitimate while suppressing and obscuring its negative consequences. The conceptual framework enables us to understand not only the subjective experiences of individuals and collectives involved in project-based work but also how these subjective experiences are rooted in dominant discourses and why people continue to sustain these discourses despite their consequences. Our analysis is specifically concerned with the following theoretically grounded manifestations of vulnerability and unsustainability:

- The state of being existentially exposed (Grear, 2011) i.e. that we are vulnerable not only to difficult external circumstances but also to our internalised discursively grounded notions of what is desirable, legitimate and thinkable in work organisations.
- The notion of resilience as a neo-liberal construct of coping (Evans and Reid, 2013), i.e. that vulnerability cannot be avoided, only handled and coped with, and that such insight is necessary for resistance.
- The finite nature of resources (Thompson, 2007), i.e. the discursively constructed and subjectively experienced limitations to time, money and material resources but also to commitment, loyalty and human dignity.
- The ensuing moral/ethical dilemmas, i.e. that our way(s) of invoking, sustaining and resisting dominant discourses implicate us in complex ethical responsibilities both as workers and as organisational scholars.

Vulnerable selves in the project discourse: The ICT sector revisited

Drawing critically on the concepts of vulnerability and neo-liberal doctrine of resilience, we now turn to a concrete empirical analysis of how the project management discourse is invoked in project-based work, and the increasing risk of it making the world of work unsustainable in a long-term. The image of a cycle pointing to the nuanced and potentially suppressed consequences of project discourse (Figure 1) is, in our view, helpful to illustrate how they are being reproduced over time with people drawing upon, subjugating themselves to and/or being enrolled on various forms of the project discourse simultaneously. In order to develop sensitivity to the existential implications of the project structures and control processes produced through projectification as a discursive practice in organisations and society, we draw on four manifestations of vulnerability/unsustainability as outlined in the preceding section: (1) the state of being existentially exposed; (2) the notion of resilience as a neo-liberal doctrine of coping; (3) the finite nature of human resources; and (4) the ensuing moral/ethical dilemmas. These manifestations are in many ways inter-related and appear simultaneously when workers explain and reflect upon their subjective experiences of projectified work.

We have revisited some of our earlier studies of the project discourse and projectification in the ICT consulting sector (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009a), subjecting them to an analysis consistent with the above. The general working conditions in the sector were present also in our fieldwork, e.g. individualistic employment relations, interactive work in small teams, deadline focus, careers through reputation-building and a mix of autonomy and managerial control (Barrett, 2001; Peticca-Harris *et al.*, 2015). The fieldwork, which generated the interview material used in this study, was designed as a participative cooperative inquiry to generate insights into project-related experiences of practitioners on the basis of their accounts, reflections and thoughts obtained mainly through the method known as active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Silverman, 2001). Our intention was to capture the continual construction of, and experiences with, projects and project management in contemporary organisational practice. Specifically for this paper, we have selected interview data sets in which respondents explain and reflect upon aspects of project-based work already established in extant literatures, such as the view of the project concept in terms of labelling and content, how individuals related to specific discursive notions of project work, the commitment of individuals to projects and the possibilities for work-life balance, how individuals describe themselves in relation to work and established identity bases and the role of embodied (bodily felt) sense beyond feelings (cf Cicmil *et al.*, 2009a,b; Lindgren *et al.*, 2014). Although the interviews were thus framed by a number of themes related to the project discourse and how it is invoked in work, the interviewees were also encouraged to raise and pursue emergent aspects salient to their experiences.

The state of being existentially exposed

Projects and project management represent to our respondents the possibility of achieving the impossibility, of overcoming the finiteness of resources, of mastering the nature. What large organisations cannot imagine or achieve, project teams can. Although most studied projects are much more mundane than the staggering megaprojects, they still become discursive vehicles for the same notion of projects as almost worthwhile *per se*, as proofs of ability and creativity, as displays of things that inspire and motivate people. An experienced manager expresses this belief in projects in the following way, articulating both the dominant positive discursive notion of innovation and achievement as well as the suppressed notion of personal exposure to risk:

Well, a project is what happens from the idea, a flash of genius or whatever, from that idea until it is accomplished. Projects are always something that is shared with other people. Projects have this dynamic development curve, it goes up and down and up and up again to a peak. Where the gates are opened, the product is presented to the world. Project-oriented people are often impatient but also enduring. Impatience speeds things up and creates a momentum in the development, and endurance means that you want to see this thing materialising, ready out there. Otherwise it is a big personal failure for those who run a project (Sam, Compute).

When facing problems of delivering according to specification, it becomes a matter not only of not creating the expected customer value but also of not living up to promises made to oneself and other close colleagues:

We try to make people plan their own time. If you have a deadline, you have a deadline. It shows a lack of respect to the project and all the people in the project if you go away. A lack of respect to the customer, the project manager, the team members, you put them all in a bad situation (Eric, Compute).

A project is in that sense a matter of honour and shame where people have assumed responsibility for something that they could not handle as well as

anticipated or were only able to gain a quickly forgotten recognition for. When faced with the problems often appearing in projects, people tend to justify their doings by invoking the project discourse anew—in terms of an inevitable and irreplaceable procedure of handling complex matters. The notion that there were no other possible ways may in one sense be a source of comfort—nothing else could have worked better—but in the end also a source of ontological insecurity—nothing else will ever work better. One of our respondents, reflecting on the inevitability of current matters and the internalisation of responsibility for what still do not work, describes this as...

...throwing away one month of my life. Despite all that work, we could not finish the project at X anyway, ... After summer, I was scheduled for a new project at Y, so I could only be at X in evenings and weekends. Our contact persons [at X] only worked daytime, so our communication deteriorated. Sometimes, I was actually afraid to meet them in the corridors; I knew that they had been complaining to [my project manager]. We actually called in [our systems architect] during his leave of absence, he should have been available the whole time, I think (Matthew, Compute).

This is exacerbated by the notion that no one actually can control how success and/or failure in project is constructed—it is a political process in which project results, heroes and scapegoats are constructed in power relations. Contrary to the dominant project discourse, no one can be sure that a project can be objectively evaluated—instead, they are subject to the same political processes as every organisational setting (Fincham, 2002; Sage *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, not belonging to a project often means not being part of what is seen as important, recognised and admirable.

It may also be a source of feelings of inadequacy and otherness—in the sense that people and organisations hold themselves responsible for not utilising the freedoms and opportunities that lay before them, or in the sense that many find themselves in the periphery of action.

Well, I think that this youthful glow, this dedication to your field of interest, it can consume you, I mean, these young ICT-consultants, it takes so much time, it is programming, it takes so damn much time, there is no end to it. Some sort of workoholism, that you have to be working to prove that you are alive. I think the turning point is when you get kids; it is self-regulating to some extent. But then there are people who just do not care anyway, and just keep on going (James, Compute).

Resilience as coping

At the same time, practitioners are most aware that the dominant discursive notion of project planning and control represents a deception of both oneself and others:

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. You must take the chance and say that you now know enough to start, that you have control over the black holes (Eric, Compute).

Everybody should work with everybody else, towards a common goal. That's what the ideal project should be like. But in reality, projects are never ideal (Eve, Compute).

The quote below shows that participants experiencing the above do not question the discourse. They internalise unpredictability as their own weakness and continue with self-sacrificing.

My priorities are with my family. If I would have problems with the kids or in my marriage, I would not be able to work like this. Of course, it has been like a jigsaw puzzle this year, since I have worked 400 hours extra. You know, I have a fixed number of hours to charge the customer, but my employment contract also says that all commitments shall be fulfilled (Eric, Compute).

Simultaneously, project participants internalise and commit to the requirement of being resilient in a particular way despite the sense of exhaustion. Project work routinely implies and expects personal readiness to work extra hours at short notice as required by the project schedule; the excuse given routinely is that it will get better later on. The total commitment to the project is justified by reference to such temporariness, yet project workers often have several project commitments simultaneously or may get new project assignments.

You know, a project is an outburst, you work in a team for some months and then it is over. It is always stress in the end, you can't avoid that. And then it starts again. First, there is a party, then there is a day off, and then you go on to the next project. I'm never really away from it (Eve, Compute).

If they are tired after earlier projects, I just have to go on anyway. The only thing that I cannot change in their schedules is planned vacations...(Eve, Compute).

The ideal project worker is a person that is fully flexible—a person without any hindrances such as private-life commitments, voluntary work responsibilities and so forth, thus presumed to have become resilient and in possession of infinite resources and energy. Each project is managed as a temporary exception where normal rules do not apply a 'state of emergency' or 'martial law episode' that must be handled by means of prompt and dedicated action. Even for individuals who do not exhaust all their resources and are able to cope, the very awareness of exposure to such conditions over the course of a projectified work-life constitute a fundamental insecurity and vulnerability.

I felt totally burned out after that project. I worked 65 hours and six days per week for half a year, and I guess that it was about the third time that I did not have any friends left. You don't have that if you never leave the workplace. Saturday was my day off, all other days I worked (Eve, Compute).

The finiteness of resources

By resorting to current work practices as a necessity for sensing progress and meaning, people in project become both 'sensation seekers' and 'sensation providers', trapped in the unsustainable notion of always being expected to perform the unimaginable and devise radical solutions to any problem that may appear. These expectations are often grounded in an understanding of life as discontinuous and open for active change efforts, of societal structures as blank sheets of paper not limiting the space of action for dedicated people. At the same time, it means that these expectations are both individualised and internalised, often beyond the control of managers and organisations:

I cannot watch people throwing managers on the floor and resort to chaos. People feel better when they do not have to live in an outer chaos. But the inner chaos is harder to relieve, it has to be channelled through some sort of professional fulfilment. People always feel bad when exposed to unnecessary conflicts and loose external structures, they feel insecure (Sam, Compute).

The above issues of identity doubts and self-respect can evolve into exhaustion, an existential discontent with one's own practice as lived experience including the feelings of honour/shame and questioning personal worthiness, leading to an even stronger perpetual commitment to the project with a hope 'it will be better next time':

We did not anticipate any technical problems. I am not that technical expert that understands everything, I thought we would pull it off. [...] From my perspective this is both a failure

and success. I failed to deliver in time and within the budget, and that is the main task of a project manager. But we have a satisfied customer and made good money. It will be better next time (Eric, Compute).

Moral/ethical problems

Why do people continue to sustain and participate in projectification processes? From this perspective, it seems to be because they cannot imagine or dare do something else. They operate within the project discourse, unable to pursue any other work-life than the one deemed acceptable and legitimate, unable to take handle the personal risks associated with articulating and attempting at alternative practices.

The project discourse is strong and seen as inevitable in the ICT sector, it is rational and indisputable and one cannot do anything else but continue to work by projects in the established manners. One cannot refrain from projects. One's value and worthiness is never stable or reliable, it has to be proved and reclaimed over and over again, allowing projects to creep into our identities and view of the world. We want news, sensations. The search for and commitment to new projects is at the same time also caused by a positive ambition not only reactive fear but also it makes us vulnerable anyway. Vulnerability also stems from things we find stimulating and attractive—confirming the power of the discourse within which one operates and reproduces it over time.

I often wonder if everyone would have been better off if we didn't 'have' projects. The logic, procedures, methodology and behaviour framed through a project mindset, are detrimental to the effectiveness and quality of work, working relationships with the client and among the team. Not enough scope and time [are allowed] to develop collaboration, to allow for common-sense as things emerge, to deal with complexity... we are trying to square the circle all the time (Simon, SIM).

When people in social interaction construct assumptions about project work in the ICT sector, when attributing certain meanings to the project concept, when forming expectations on the project process and the usefulness of project management tools and methods—they reinforce the superiority and the effectiveness of the project form, continue to manage ICT projects as if organisational and cultural contexts do not exist and expect everyone to remain effective, creative and in control. Taken together, our analysis has shown that the exposure to profound consequences of projectification as discursive practice may over time exhaust all the finite individual and societal resources available and leave us in a state of existential vulnerability—constantly aware of our overwhelming responsibilities and the limited possibilities to understand them, cope with them, and deliver upon them. The critical question in the spirit of 'sustainability' is 'Which restorative actions may be possible?'

Concluding thoughts on vulnerability and unsustainability in project-based work

Our aim with the paper has been to argue that the discursive projectification of work-life may not only expose people to unsustainable working conditions in terms of deadline stress and overload but also contribute to their declining senses of progress, hope, and personal worthiness. We have attempted to expose the prevailing discourse and practice of project-based working and management to critical scrutiny against the backdrop of vulnerability. This calls for explicit recognition of the finiteness of human, temporal and social resources and the ensuing unsustainability of projectified work. The notion of vulnerability provides us with

an alternative means with which to represent the discursive fabric of projectification. Theoretically, we have pointed out that the project discourse is constructed and reproduced through a specific interplay of perception, knowledge and rationality forming an inescapable 'prison' through various subtle manifestations of power. Project discourse does not allow for a straightforward acknowledgement of radical unpredictability, thus allowing the use of project management tools for making it more predictable by means of 'future perfect' thinking, planning and risk management. However, by seemingly eliminating, side-lining or masking the unsettling disturbing feel of unpredictability, i.e. a possibility of not being in control, the discourse is invoked in ways which may result in the conditions of existential vulnerability, exhaustion, an unsustainable quest for resilience and moral/ethical struggles.

The centrality of projects as drivers of change implementation at the operational level and achievement of strategic goals seems to have been accompanied by disregard for the well-being of project workers and problematic consequences of project overload (Karrbom Gustavsson, 2016). We have emphasised that projectification processes in the ICT sector, conceived as a product of a widely spread and colonising project management discourse, are yet another contributor to unsustainability in work-life with significant existential consequences. Our analysis led to an understanding of the vulnerabilities resulting from people being exposed, collectively and individually to mental, social and bodily exhaustion and threat through decisions and actions grounded in the colonising project management discourse. It also indicates a particular type of resilience being subtly imposed by the absence of acknowledging the finiteness of human, temporal and social resources and how this may develop into an unsustainable working life. The notion of being existentially exposed is in our argument linked to the neoliberal notion of resilience (Evans and Reid, 2013) discussed earlier. Projectified workers tend to cope by just following the same pattern (Figure 1), as they are existentially deeply embedded into existing project management processes and power structures that they cannot dare or even imagine any other way of making sense of their work let alone resisting the project discourse. They are enrolled on the doctrine of resilience, which encourages them to thrive on existential danger, extreme workloads and post-project catharsis that the state of exception is the place to be if one is to be recognised and appreciated. All this severely limits the possibilities of resistance or reasonable solutions to these problems, more severely perhaps than the earlier critical studies have acknowledged. In the long run, project work can be the new normal to strive for and spreads also to other forms of work.

The perspective taken here captured by Figure 1, we hope, could and should mobilise the deconstruction of the projectification process towards raising awareness of an irreversible decline of the coping capacity of project workers in the ICT sector and the addictive requirement to be resilient at any cost, imposed on and internalised by them as a condition of success and longevity. Under those perpetual circumstances, resilience is understood and internalised by workers as a virtuous ability to cope with vulnerability by letting some elements of life being destroyed; thus re-emerging existentially vulnerable rather than avoiding or resisting vulnerability.

Possibilities for restorative action

The main consequence for future critical project research of the perspective taken here is the need for a continuing dialogue and debate related to the perpetual extreme work conditions, states of exception, the neo-liberal doctrine of resilience at any, even existential, cost and long-term consequences of such projectification processes. More analysis is needed of how the project discourse is drawn upon

in daily practice and how it exposes project workers and, for that matter, ICT-based project-intensive organisations to existential vulnerability. Project workers' ability to relate meaningfully to their practice by reflecting on that very practice and its embodied language games can be a way towards liberation from the discursive prison of project management towards more human, spatial-relational and temporal understandings of projectified organisations. Such 'attunement' to one's lived experience is bodily and relational as well as self-caring (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015).

We need an alternative discursive notion of contemporary work in organisations and society that acknowledges inter-relationality between perception, knowledge and rationality. Our acceptance of the unsustainability concerns shifts boundary constraints from plenitude to limitation and from efficiency to equity, care and ethics. Vulnerability (Morrow, 2011) and limits to resilience should become the key criteria behind the quest for increased accountability and transparency in project-related decision-making.

In our pursuit of developing an affirmative critique towards the possibilities for more democratic, responsible and ethically aware ways of studying, managing and working in projectified organisations, we argue that the notion of 'relational vulnerability' can be useful in achieving such aim. As a critical normative thesis, it is concerned with people being existentially exposed due to inherent affectability and embodiment of beings at any level. It promotes the engagement with cross-disciplinary critical debates in the fields of sustainability/sustainable development (for example, Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; Curry, 2011; Thompson, 2007; Evans, 2010; Hutchings, 2010; Marshall, 2011; Fineman and Grear, 2013; Evans and Reid, 2013; Skoglund, 2015; among others). Ontologically, relational vulnerability re-focuses attention on regaining the freedom to realise one's humanity in healthy and mutually respectful relationships with others, as well as freedom from homogenising globalised industrialist capitalist paradigms and discourses. This kind of epistemic openness and its ethics might be welcome in the contemporary crisis of project theory. In the spirit of Gladwin *et al.*'s (1995) critical sustainable development benchmarks, such developments in theory and practical action must be governed in a manner which is inclusive, interconnected, equitable, prudent and secure.

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