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Tensions and vulnerabilities in projectified selves: Exploring gender and projectification in neoliberal academic cultures

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the multiple facets of academic projectified selves, i.e. how academics relate to the culture of projectification in neoliberal society, crafting themselves and their careers. We focus our inquiry on the highly gendered character of projectified selves and uncover differences in how the subject position of the projectified self is invoked in academic work, as well as the tensions inherent in such identity work. Through a qualitative interview study involving senior lecturers, both women and men, in a social science discipline across five Swedish universities, we identify three variations of the academic projectified self. We find that they navigate tensions between individual liberties and organisational limitations; that they experience recognition as transitory and unreliable; and that attachment to work is often located in ‘micro-spaces’ rather than in work as a whole. The analysis emphasises the vulnerability of the academic projectified self – in constant need of achievements, projects, and reputation-building initiatives – and how projectification perpetuates gendered inequalities. The article concludes with a discussion on how the notion of the projectified self can be employed in future emancipatory project studies.

1. Introduction

In the emerging field of emancipatory research within contemporary project studies (Gerald & Söderlund, 2018), there is a growing concern regarding the attraction and pressure experienced by individuals in contemporary societies to immerse themselves in the culture of projects (cf., Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Lindgren, Packendorff & Sergi, 2014; Cicmil, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2016; Jensen, Thuesen & Gerald, 2016; Barondeau & Hobbs, 2019). By conceptualising the general subject position constituted in such a societal culture as a *projectified self* (Kalf, 2017; Berglund et al., 2020), we aim to extend existing theoretical notions of neoliberal selves – sometimes also referred to as enterprising or entrepreneurial selves (Du Gay, 2004; Bröckling, 2015) – into an analysis of micro-level projectification in society and its consequences. This highlights how individuals in neoliberal society are not only encouraged to identify with being efficient, self-commercialising, self-improving, and responsible, but also how, as projectified selves, they are expected to compartmentalise their lives into courses of action that showcase their abilities to remain worthy and useful.

Recent research has indeed examined how individuals in neoliberal societies are drawn towards and encouraged to adopt the project culture

in pursuit of individual worth and recognition (Jensen et al., 2016; Kalf, 2017; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2017; Berglund et al., 2020; Dollinger, 2020; Lewis & Decuyper, 2023). Neoliberalism implies that market-based principles and ideologies infiltrate all aspects of life (Bröckling, 2015) and constitute general subject positions in society through power structures and discourses. Subject positions provide us with “guidelines for deciding what one should consider in the situation or cultural environment where one acts as sanctioned, normal and desirable as distinct from prohibited, deviant and repulsive” (Törrönen, 2001: 316). The neoliberal promises of enterprising and emancipated lives thus come at the cost of succumbing to subject positions emphasising ideal citizens as active, responsible, self-improving, performing, and useful (Berglund, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2017). However, these subject positions are not equally available to everyone and vary across different contexts and sectors in neoliberal society. We have seen this in the emerging landscape of social media (Berglund et al., 2020), in gender-equality development (Öjehag-Pettersson, 2017), educational settings (Lewis & Decuyper, 2023), and in entrepreneurship (Bröckling, 2005).

In this article, we explore the highly gendered character of projectified selves – i.e., that projectified selves are inherently masculine

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constructions, where men and women have different access to the various manifestations of worth and greatness, and where the risks of unworthiness and vulnerability tend to be present in different ways (Bröckling, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2012; Berglund et al., 2017). This entails inquiring into gendered subject positions that individual 'projectified selves' develop, gendered practices that perpetuate the projectified culture, and the inherent tensions and vulnerabilities in projectified selves. Given the limited scholarly knowledge of how these issues play out in everyday organisational life, we turn to the academic context, which is suitable for developing the theoretical notion of projectified selves. Academic work is projectified on a daily basis and also highly gendered (Fowler et al., 2015; Ylijoki, 2016; Griffin, 2022), with cultural traditions emphasising individualism, work fragmentation, masculinity, and self-promotion. Our aim with this article is thus to advance emancipatory project studies through a study of how academic professionals relate to the gendered culture of projectification in crafting themselves and their careers.

The article begins by reviewing the literature related to projectified selves and gender, but also – in order to contextualise the empirical study – to academic workplaces. Through a qualitative interview study involving senior lecturers, both women and men, in a social science discipline across five Swedish universities, we uncover differences in how the gendered project culture is internalised in academic careers and the tensions inherent in such identity work. These differences – presented through three variations of the (academic) projectified self – are then discussed with reference to tensions, vulnerabilities, and gender. The article concludes with a discussion on how the notion of the projectified self can be employed in future emancipatory project studies.

2. Theoretical framework: academics as projectified selves

2.1. The projectified self in an emancipatory research agenda

During recent years, project studies have taken an increasingly critical interest in how individuals work and live in 'projectified' conditions (cf. Gill, 2002; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006; Rowlands & Handy, 2012; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Cicmil et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2016). Against the backdrop of a general projectification of society and the emergence of projects as a governmental technology (Fred & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2019; Lundin et al., 2015; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2017; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014; Ylijoki, 2016), this interest was initially concerned with issues related to workplace stress and wellbeing among project workers (Gällstedt, 2003; Aguilar Velasco & Wald, 2022). Recently, this has evolved into emancipatory research agendas (Gerald & Söderlund, 2018; Jacobsson & Jalocha, 2021), in which notions of power, subjugation, identity, and life forms have appeared as useful analytical concepts for understanding how individuals live and work in contemporary societies. From mainly having analysed individuals in their capacity as organisational workers subject to organisational conditions, this research is increasingly interested in individuals as such, as social beings immersed in a complex web of cultural belongings and expectations.

In this article, we build on this emancipatory interest through the subject position of the 'projectified self' (Kalf, 2017; Berglund et al., 2020) as a way of conceptualising an identification with the ethos of societal projectification and its consequences (see Table 1). As noted by Törrönen (2001), subject positioning is not so much about the specific identity of an individual, but rather about individuals' ongoing acts of identification as they navigate through social life.

"Subject positions evolve in socio-cultural practices. We identify with them because they offer us viewpoints and classificatory schemas to think and act in concrete situations. Thus, instead of supposing that identification occurs automatically, we should analyse through what kind of intensities and mechanisms one situationally identifies with the subject positions circulating around us

Table 1

Core tenets of the 'projectified self' (adapted from Berglund et al., 2020, p. 369).

Higher common principles	Activity, projects, extension of the network, proliferation of connections, individual responsibility, economisation, self as enterprise.
State of worthiness	Engaged, engaging, enthusiastic, involved, flexible, adaptable, versatile, having potential, employable, autonomous, rational, know how to engage others, in touch, in control, tolerant, authentic, un-provoking, un-controversial, self-regulating.
Subjects	Mediator, project head, coach expert, customer, supplier, innovator, consumer, influencer, entrepreneur, intrapreneur.
Objects	New technologies, informal relations, relations of trust, partnership, agreements, alliances, subcontracting, networks, links, projects, plans, business plans, web sites, social media.
Investment	Adaptability, identity/subject positioning (as always open for change).
Test	The end of a project and the beginning of another, conception of future projects.
Judgement and evidence	Being called upon to participate, receiving attention, acclaim and admiration.
The fall	Closure of the network, corruption, privileges, mafia, becoming forgotten, becoming unrecognised.
State of unworthiness (vulnerability)	Unadaptable, does not inspire confidence, authoritarian, rigid, intolerant, immobile, local, rooted, attached, security (prefers), without projects, without consumption.

[...] and how subject positions are used as resources in concrete dialogues" (Törrönen, 2001: 315)

While the 'projectified self' is indeed useful in exploring how and why some individuals practice projects or live their lives as projects, the emancipatory interest implies a focus on what the consequences are of invoking projects as a discursive formation in society in their lives and whose interests are served/not served by reproducing the status quo in the field (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil et al., 2016). When we invoke and identify with subject positions in daily life situations, we are part of a production of power structures in society where certain identity forms and world-views become more 'natural' and 'truthful' than others (Törrönen, 2001). Moreover, subject positions are not equally available to all of us – as they tend to presuppose certain personal characteristics – e.g. the subject position of being 'enterprising' or 'an entrepreneur, which is traditionally linked to certain forms of masculinity and class (Wee & Brooks, 2012; Berglund et al., 2017). This implies that our 'use' of subject positions is often fraught with tensions and render us vulnerable in relation to societal ideals and virtues.

Based on sociological analyses of projects as a mode of justification (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Barondeau & Hobbs, 2019) and of individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism as central to contemporary subject positioning (Bröckling, 2015), the notion of the projectified self makes three broad arguments.

First, for individuals in neoliberal society, projects have become an unquestioned vehicle for organising reality, a rational scheme of life, and a particular way of forming a relationship with the self and others (Cicmil et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2016; Barondeau & Hobbs, 2019). Current critical theorising in project studies on the conditions for individuals has indeed acknowledged this (cf. Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Kalf, 2017), but at the same time, these analyses often tend to relate these conditions mainly to Project Management as a general discursive formation (cf. Lindgren et al., 2014), rather than to the underlying societal structures, of which Project Management is just one of many expressions of projectification.

Second, the emergence of projectified selves is intertwined with cultural values inherent in projectified neoliberal society, in which individuals' worth is dependent upon their ability to constantly perform, often by producing and consuming themselves and others as self-controlling, self-improving, self-commercialising, life-

compartmentalising, and deadline-driven human beings (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Bröckling, 2015; Kalff, 2022; Sadeghi, Islam & Van Lent, 2024). The sequencing of work thus demands maximum flexibility from the projectified self, who must not only shift between intense modes of self-organisation and high degrees of cooperation, but also manage different projects and their potential overlaps, clashes, and opportunities for coordination.

Third, the projectified self experiences a constant urge to negotiate with itself, as if s/he were an enterprise – negotiations taking place within a system of class belongings, gendered practices, and professional norms (Bröckling, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2012). Similar to descriptions of the entrepreneurial self, the projectified self is expected to be both its own boss and subordinate, its own supplier and customer – an ‘action-seeking’ (Jacobsson & Söderholm, 2022) and ‘prosuming’ (Berglund et al., 2020) subject always in tension or conflict with itself in striving to reach its potential. From an emancipatory perspective, however, it is a vulnerable subject (Cicmil et al., 2016), still exposed to gendered, class-related, and professional expectations and norms on how to navigate different aspects of life and the interests of various internal ‘stakeholders’ – personal development, family life, careers, online persona, and consumption habits. In analysing social media influencers as projectified selves, Berglund et al. (2020) find that such aspects tend to be highly gendered – the fashioning of one’s online persona takes place within the bounds of contemporary femininities and masculinities, such as post-feminist can-do attitudes and the celebration of male nerdiness.

2.2. Academic projectified selves

While the ‘projectified self’ is indeed useful in exploring how and why some individuals practise projects or live their lives as projects, the emancipatory interest implies a focus on the consequences of invoking projects as a discursive formation in society, and whose interests are served or not served by reproducing the status quo in the field (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil et al., 2016). When we invoke and identify with subject positions in daily life situations, we are part of the production of power structures in society, where certain identity forms and world-views become more ‘natural’ and ‘truthful’ than others (Törrönen, 2001). Moreover, subject positions are not equally available to all, as they tend to presuppose certain personal characteristics – for example, the subject position of being ‘enterprising’ or ‘an entrepreneur’, which is traditionally linked to certain forms of masculinity and class (Wee & Brooks, 2012; Berglund et al., 2017). This implies that our ‘use’ of subject positions is often fraught with tensions and renders us vulnerable in relation to societal ideals and virtues.

At the same time, academics are employed in organisations (such as universities) characterised by significant repetitiveness, a tendency towards bureaucratisation, and the subjection of (parts of) daily work to detailed regulation – thereby homogenising academics and academic workplace cultures. A substantial portion of academic work takes place within regulatory systems for performance measurement and evaluation, the planning and scheduling of teaching, research project administration, career development, and employment, among others (Baur, Besio, & Norkus, 2018; Bristow, Robinson, & Ratle, 2017; Haddow & Hammarfelt, 2019). Additionally, academic organisations have imported generic work-life practices, replete with formal management structures, an abundance of meetings and communication channels, codes of conduct, demands for loyalty to the employer, and similar processes (Nästesjö, 2023). It is increasingly difficult for academics to disregard or resist these instances of managerialism. The academic projectified self is therefore not only expected to be a free-spirited entrepreneurial actor, but also a receptive, adaptive, and conforming team player.

It is well-documented that academics tend to handle organisational-cultural characteristics in different ways when it comes to constructing their professional identity (cf. Knights & Clarke, 2014; Bristow et al.,

2017; Nästesjö, 2023). There are differences in terms of, for example, ambition and grit, views on careers and careering, the justification and usefulness of academic work, and the approach to responsibility and academic citizenship. There are also differences in emphasis on research, teaching, and administration. Moreover, these identifications and views may change over the course of an academic career, and they are highly gendered (Lund & Tienari, 2019; Macfarlane & Burg, 2019; Nielsen, 2021; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024). From this, it follows that the academic projectified self has many faces, evolves over time, and that different individuals invoke different constellations of cultural values and internal tensions.

2.3. Gendered projectified selves in academia

A range of studies suggests that contemporary academic workplace cultures – in the context of neoliberalisation – tend to be dominated by new forms of managerialist, individualist, performance-based, and masculinist values and norms (cf. Loveday, 2018; Lund & Tienari, 2019; Snickare & Wahl, 2024; Bone, 2021). These cultures evolve, for example, through the invisibilisation of relational responsibilities outside work and the expectation to bring these responsibilities into the workplace (De Coster & Zanoni, 2019); through the normalisation of masculine career patterns and modes of performing (van den Brink et al., 2016) and through organising important academic events in ways that promote masculine homosociality (Nästesjö, 2023). Pecis & Priola (2019) note that the issue of contemporary masculinities in academia is complex, in that traditional and emerging masculinities tend to coexist and coalesce, leading to consequences such as men reproducing norms that prioritise work and careers over other aspects of life, while simultaneously arguing that the ‘modern’ and ‘equal’ approach is to enable and encourage women to make similar priorities.

Academic careers under such circumstances are increasingly vulnerable and lack relationality, as they unfold in a milieu where the primary virtues are to adapt, embrace risks, promote oneself, and view colleagues as competitors (Kallio et al., 2016; Johansson, 2022). At the same time, academia still offers supportive collectives, and thus, recognition possibilities, based on collegial values such as quality in work, notions of excellence and intellectualism, sceptical stances towards managerial control systems, and a sense of resistance to managerialism and surveillance (Nästesjö, 2023). However, these recognition possibilities are not equally accessible to everyone. For instance, supposedly neutral concepts and formal systems for defining and evaluating merits tend to be practised in gender-biased ways, and masculine appearances, career patterns, networks, and priorities are systematically upgraded and rewarded (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024; Lund & Tienari, 2019; Macfarlane & Burg, 2019; Nielsen, 2021; van den Brink, Holgersson, Linghag, & Deé, 2016). Furthermore, women are expected to perform much of the relational ‘housework’ necessary to keep academic life running smoothly – even though this work is often undervalued and absent from meritocratic assessments (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024). Women academics also tend to describe their work as more than just a job, but as part of their inner selves, which in turn renders them further vulnerable to misrecognition and non-recognition of their professional worth and viability (Rosewell & Ashwin, 2019). Based on this reasoning, our study is driven by the following research questions:

- What variants of the projectified self emerge within academia?
- Which practices are emphasized to perpetuate the projectified culture in academic settings?
- What tensions and vulnerabilities arise concerning the dilemmas inherent in the projectified self?
- How are gendered implications manifested within the projectified self?

These questions formed the basis of the interviews conducted as part

of the empirical fieldwork and later guided the analytical work. In the methodology section below, we will return to how these questions were applied in the analysis and presentation of the empirical study.

3. Methodology

This study is based on data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 43 individuals (21 men and 24 women) holding positions as senior lecturers/associate professors at five Swedish universities, here referred to as University A-E. At the time of the study, their approximate ages ranged between 35 and 65, evenly distributed across this span. They all belong to the same teaching-intensive major social science discipline, but work in departments where active participation in research is expected.

Senior lecturers are suitable as informants for this study as they hold tenured positions based on past achievements, and studying the notion of projectified selves through them enabled us to focus on their lived experiences as career academics, without foregrounding anxieties related to powerlessness and the risk of redundancy. At the same time, those aiming to pursue full professorships in the future are under constant pressure to perform in terms of international journal publications and securing research grants to build their portfolios. A typical senior lecturer position includes 20–30 % paid research time, but this only covers their own personal work. Cutting-edge research endeavours involving PhD candidates, postdoctoral fellows, and research assistants typically require external funding through multiple parallel projects (Griffin, 2022), and rejection rates in this subject area among the major research funding bodies often exceed 90 %.

The university departments differed in terms of age, size, geographical location, academic reputation, focus areas within the general subject field, and other aspects. However, we did not incorporate these differences into our analysis, primarily because they are all subject to the same funding model and regulatory framework. Moreover, this approach enabled us to maintain a high level of anonymity.

We did not conduct empirical fieldwork in our 'own' universities. Nevertheless, our remaining 'insider status' (Bone, 2021) offered several advantages compared to studying 'external' sectors, organisations, and professions—not least familiarity with the culture, which facilitated the construction of meaningful questions and approaches, the ability to build trustful relationships with respondents, casting us as benevolent colleagues, and a deep understanding of academic identities and narratives that enhanced analytical procedures. However, potential challenges exist, such as being too close to the data to maintain analytical distance or being influenced by expectations from one's collegial communities about what problems and findings are legitimate (Clarke & Knights, 2015). Aware of these issues, we continually interrogated ourselves and our findings, juxtaposing the empirical data with our own experiences as men and women in academia to arrive at 'thicker' understandings.

The fieldwork reported in this paper was conducted just before the Covid-19 pandemic and was the final phase of a larger critical study of performance-based governance in a range of academic organisations, presented to informants as exploratory research on the current state of performance evaluation and academic leadership in Sweden. Access was gained by the authors of this article through direct contact with lecturers.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner at the workplaces of informants, mostly in Swedish. All informants were asked to discuss both work and life in general. Interviews lasted one to two hours per person and were audio-recorded with the informants' consent and later transcribed. To study how academic professionals relate to the culture of projectification in crafting their selves and careers, we drew upon earlier writings on projects as a human condition and projectified selves (Jensen et al., 2016; Kalf, 2017; Barondeau & Hobbs, 2019; Berglund et al., 2020). Thus, each interview revolved around issues such as academic careers, identity, work-life balance, gender stereotypes, and

the practices and possibilities of experiencing appreciation, esteem, autonomy, and professional integrity at work. Although framed by theoretical concepts, the informants were also encouraged to raise and pursue emerging aspects salient to their experiences.

We approached the data analysis after all interviews had been completed and transcribed. At this stage of the research, we invited a third author, with expertise in studies on the projectified self, for collaborative work. The analytical process involved several 'moves' (Grodal, Anteby & Holm, 2021): asking questions, dropping/merging/splitting categories, and contrasting categories.

Each of the three authors independently reviewed the transcribed interview excerpts in relation to the empirical research questions outlined earlier, with the question in mind: "What is going on here?" (cf. Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). In a subsequent research meeting, we shared our manual notes on 'what was going on' and delineated ten subthemes through a process of dropping, merging, and splitting categories. We arrived at a common understanding of the recurring issues: (i) academic citizenship as social/relational; (ii) freedom to direct one's life; (iii) freedom from the organisation; (iv) one's career versus organisational demands; (v) career strategic thinking; (vi) performance culture; (vii) organisational recognition; (viii) the job as personal development; (ix) the job as 'breadwinning'; and (x) the job as relational.

In the next step of the analysis, we selected exemplary quotes for each theme to locate aggregate themes. The same structure was followed, where individual analysis transitioned to collective work. Through this process, three aggregate themes were identified: (1) Tensions between individual liberty and organisational limitations (comprising subthemes i-iv); (2) The transitoriness of professional worth and recognition (comprising subthemes v-vii); and (3) Projectified attachments to work and careers (comprising subthemes viii-x). These three aggregate themes formed the scaffold from which the different variants of the projectified (academic) self were further developed.

The informants appeared to be involved in several simultaneous processes of justifying their subjective experiences (Clarke et al., 2009), often normalising individualist notions of academic work and distancing themselves from organisational responsibilities. However, they also highlighted gendered views of academic careers, worth, recognition, and status. In the next section, we will analyse the tensions and vulnerabilities experienced by informants through these three themes, as well as strategies for handling these tensions.

4. Academic projectified selves: empirical analysis

The three versions of the projectified subject position we propose provide an understanding of how academics, over time, compartmentalise academic life into distinct projects, attempt to hold on to the (romantic) notion of academic freedom, and manage tensions and vulnerabilities. These positions illustrate how academics recognise the structured and tension-filled nature of academic life, how they strategise their work by compartmentalising it into projects, and how they occasionally fail in this, resorting instead to a tactic of juggling projects to manage vulnerabilities and the lack of recognition. Ultimately, they aim to find a balance that makes everyday work more bearable.

4.1. Balancing individual liberty and organizational limitations

In the interviews, many informants repeatedly express that they consider themselves as relatively independent actors, and that their professionalism is a matter of identifying and pursuing projects mainly related to research (Araújo, 2009; Baur, Besio, & Norkus, 2018). The organization's demands for performance and collective efforts are not framed as a major issue, but stressed to be matter of balancing between conflicting goals (Griffin, 2022) – as in the case below, between teaching 'your' course and agreeing to be involved in others projects:

If you start to get involved in things, there are so many other things that come into play. If you're responsible for a course, people want you to be involved at other courses too... you end up with several things that together can almost consume all of your time. It's very difficult to find that balance. I can't just teach; if I do it, I want to do it well. It's the same if I'm going to be the coordinator for a master's program, then the full focus is on that. (woman senior lecturer, University A)

The quote shows how a senior woman lecturer discusses her efforts to maintain a balance in her academic routine. This narrative is a recurring theme among informants. However, what distinguishes her story is her aspiration to excel. Among the women interviewed, this aspiration was emphasized consistently; they aimed to perform at their best, sometimes simply striving for adequacy but also seeking to shield themselves from criticism. Women, more so than men, emphasized the importance of achieving excellence and taking on additional responsibilities.

Both men and women most often describe themselves and their careers as personal developmental paths that have traversed projects, critical events, and employments. Individuals who have changed jobs between different universities are more aware of the negotiated order of the academic workplace, than those who have remained at the same workplace, internalizing its norms and ideas. In the excerpt below the informant reflects upon how changing workplace may involve a lot of work to fit in at another organization; although it may still be tempting to romanticize about working at other universities:

The conditions here are very favourable, to conduct my own research and move forward. Plus, it's a harmonious environment. If I were to seek opportunities elsewhere, I would again end up in a lot of teaching, building new courses, and all of that, and that would be very demanding. So, in that way, I'm in a good position here, but I still feel that it would be fun to go and be a visiting professor at a foreign university for example. (male senior lecturer, University A)

Individual liberty and organisational limitations are expressed in this theme on a practical level, where individuals must balance academic citizenship (and the freedom it offers) with managing relationships with colleagues and navigating social situations without being perceived as difficult to work with. This often involves balancing teaching responsibilities with one's own research or dealing with the pressure to accept various academic assignments instead of prioritising personal time and the recovery necessary for creativity and new research ideas and projects (Griffin, 2022). In this dynamic, insights emerge regarding the need to assert (or reclaim) the freedom to control one's life, which may also involve freeing oneself from the organisation that was initially expected to offer such freedom. Individual career aspirations and organisational regulations thus impose conflicting demands and may become out of sync with each other. Aware of this, informants stress how they seek to operate 'under the radar', working on their projects in peace and quiet, while avoiding potential conflicts and rolling over the responsibility of academic citizenship and collegiality to their peers:

I am very far from those processes. I am aware of the committees and what they are called, but not exactly what they are supposed to do... I've spent my fair share of meeting time in my working life; I used that up when I worked at [a large private corporation]. So, when I came to [this university], it was a relief not to attend meetings all day long. So, I have stayed away from that type of departmental committees and educational committees and suchlike. (male senior lecturer, University D)

This strategy is however not accessible to all, depending on different performative expectations. From previous studies, we know that men have more leeway when it comes to being seen as "socially deviant," making it easier for them to say no and dedicate time to their own research (De Coster & Zanoni, 2019; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024). Conversely, women tend to be expected to "pitch in" and contribute to

the organization by engaging in academic housework (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019), while being grateful for the opportunities presented to them.

They want us to be a community here; you are not an individual in the full sense, because you should be able to co-author publications and bring others along, you should be able to attract external funding that pays for more than just yourself, initiate seminar activities, and so on, so they try to create some form of groupings and such. But all this goes against all these formal systems that emphasise individuals and individual performance. (woman senior lecturer, University C)

This quote points to the difficulties in 'walking the talk' because there is a disconnection between organisational narratives of academic collaboration and the performance-based, individualised formal system. The practices that emerge to manage these tensions can metaphorically be understood as a game of "Old Maid," a game in which one should not be left holding a card, as that signifies losing the game of academic freedom in this context. Playing the game well may involve declining collaborations that do not directly benefit one's career, avoiding organisational responsibilities when necessary in teaching, and saying no to academic assignments, even if it is difficult to find an opponent, reviewer, or seminar leader at that particular time. Adopting this strategy can be challenging for all, but previous research shows that negotiated gender norms favour men, who can more easily assume the position of being the excellent, independent, and praised scientist, thus deviating from organisational expectations while performing according to conventional norms of science (Lund & Tienari, 2019). Male researchers can, therefore, more easily construct themselves as an "egocentric genius," an identity that does not carry the same expectations of being accommodating, cooperative, and understanding, but rather elevates oneself above the everyday grind to focus on individual projects (Lund & Tienari, 2019).

Our women informants contended that taking on the position of the egocentric genius was not an option. Rather, they confirmed that women are expected to be the opposite: social, flexible, accommodating, and helpful. This does not mean that all men present themselves as the male scientist/egocentric genius, nor does it imply that there are not women attempting to take on this position, but rather that it is considerably easier for men to assume and obtain that status compared to women (De Coster & Zanoni, 2019).

Hence, when the academic projectified self navigates tensions between individual liberty and organisational limitations, it may resemble the practices of "playing Old Maid." This game enables individuals to safeguard their projects from organisational expectations and others' desires to be involved in their work. However, within a neoliberal context, this setup is inherently biased; the prioritisation of individual liberty over organisational responsibilities is not equally attainable for everyone. While masculinity is favoured by individualistic values, legitimising an instrumental prioritisation of individual liberty, women are expected to take on the role of relational actors, adhering to organisational regulations, supporting peers, and engaging in academic housework (Johansson, Gao, Sölvell, and Wigren-Kristoferson, 2024). Even though women are more likely to testify to this injustice, it does not escape men either. A junior man at the university that appeared to us as the most managerialist one in our study (University C) lamented the lack of liberty in his own situation:

When I started here, my professor told me that "I work here, I have no boss, and I think that's great." So, in some way, I entered the job anticipating a lot of freedom and responsibility, that I would manage my own portfolio and set my own work hours, and working under such responsibility to myself. I don't think that's what you hear if you start to work here now: you are much more of an employee in a managed collective. The job has become more like other jobs, there was a difference earlier, you felt that you were in a rather special place (male lecturer, University C).

4.2. Transitoriness of professional worth and recognition

A central concern for many of our informants is that their academic work receives attention and appreciation, and that they receive recognition from their professional colleagues for their contributions to research and teaching (Nästesjö, 2023). However, it is becoming increasingly clear to many that this recognition is neither enduring, nor dependable. One cannot even depend on recognition for a performance that the organization explicitly defines as commendable. If recognition is received, it is typically limited to specific circumstances, specific work packages/sub-projects and thus also constitute a temporary and conditioned bestowal of worth. The informants witness to how they in their academic role must perform repeatedly (and even increasingly) to maintain professional worth, and begin to negotiate – not with the organizational order, but with themselves – on how to cope with the pressure:

You sort of put higher and higher demands on yourself, you want to learn and develop. But I'm not saying to anyone here that I aim for some sort of international career. It's fun to publish and go to conferences and feel that you are part of something, but you don't have to be famous. It would be nice to be promoted to full professor at some point in the future, but that is absolutely not something that I have as a career goal. It might happen if I keep up the good work. But then I need to supervise some PhD candidates as well. I'm thinking of letting it go, I'm over 50, perhaps it is good enough to have fun at work and occasionally get some good stuff out. We will see. (woman senior lecturer, University A)

This means that the question of professional worth also includes the individual's skill in acquiring recognition - thinking and acting strategically and intelligently, playing the academic game. Those who feel they have not acted as cleverly as they should regard this as a negative recognition (Tweedie et al., 2019). One strategy we have encountered among our informants is to try to dissociate one's own status from that of the university, to focus on cross-border project collaborations and frame their professional networks and publication lists as achievements accomplished despite their university rather than thanks to it (Francke & Hammarfelt, 2022; Griffin, 2022):

I and my closest colleagues, we have higher standards. We know that our university is not good enough in the eye of others. But we have seen others from [international top universities], and they are not better than us. So, our argument was that one way of showing that we are equals is if we publish in the same A+ journals as them. Last month, we were rejected after the first review in one of those. But for us we just say that if we can get into the review process, that means we are good enough. So, we were aiming for that. But nobody in the department here knows about these things. They don't know and pretty much they don't care that you are trying. (male assistant professor, University B)

Other ways of relating to recognition and appreciation included adopting a more long-term strategy where certain 'investments' need to be made in order to live a more comfortable life in the future. Seeking external funding, publishing in expected journals, and being less accessible to colleagues at times were also mentioned as elements of career strategic thinking. Our next informant reflects upon how to figure out how to avoid digging oneself an academic grave, which imply to constant pushing oneself towards displaying to others that you are constantly involved in research and publishing.

You don't get much resources for research, but you have to do it, so in essence, you end up sacrificing your own free time. If you don't do it, you're just digging your own grave in the long run. You become, fundamentally, *persona non grata*; you are essentially unemployable elsewhere. If I don't perform in research, I'll never be able to quit this place... it even cuts off that distant dream. Yes, you might end up in

some kind of administrative position, but that is a dead end as well. So, not publishing signals that you are inadequate and not doing your job, and that's something no one wants, so it pushes for research to be done anyway. (male senior lecturer, University C)

When asked about bibliometric performance assessment schemes and detailed workload planning, career-oriented men do not seem very bothered. They are rarely confronted with any managerial critique emanating from such systems, and they claim not to be overly interested in how they appear in the metrics. Their focus is scientific publishing, seen as a series of interesting challenges where one may individually compete with other individuals, gain respect from high-status colleagues, and boast one's own self-confidence. Recognition and worth are in that sense not only a question about one's own performances, but about competition and comparisons with others:

I know colleagues, I'm thinking of one in particular, who hasn't really published much in the last 3–4 years. So, of course, she's a bit questioned. Not that people talk behind her back and things like that, but... if they get any time in a meeting... Yes, it becomes a bit indirect, and people wonder why... But she doesn't lose her job. On the contrary, she has a fairly stable position at the department, really. Although she hasn't produced any research results since she started four years ago. It's a shame, but she knows about it. But a strength on her part is that she admits openly to it. She knows it's a problem, so to speak. (male senior lecturer, University D)

However, some of our informants discern alternative ways to live the academic life, where attempts to maintain a distance from the search for academic appreciation and recognition are apparent. Several informants emphasised the importance of not only being a researcher but also having a life as a parent, child, friend, partner, and so on. This 'broadened' identity construction seems more frequent among women, who reflect on how they can manage impossible demands in a context that imposes increasingly high expectations while providing significantly fewer resources (Nästesjö, 2023).

Hence, the transitoriness of professional worth and recognition illustrates the vulnerability of the academic projectified self, which is in constant need of achievements, projects, and reputation-building initiatives (Baur et al., 2018; Griffin, 2022). In this sense, professional life is laden with eternal and existential risks (Bone, 2021; Cicmil, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2016; Shahjahan, 2020) of losing one's position, status, and appreciation among peers. In a neoliberal culture characterised by competitive masculinity (Berdahl et al., 2018), what might on the surface appear to be a stable, privileged, tenured academic life is often subjectively experienced as a lonely struggle to perform and reinvent oneself (Bone, 2021). This is not least a matter of future projects that need to be chosen, planned, and designed with their possible consequences for one's worth and recognition in mind (Jensen et al., 2016).

4.3. Projectified attachments to work and careers

The notion of one's professional development and engagement is as central as it is elusive for our informants. They indeed discuss this against a general backdrop of institutionalised careerism in Academia (Clarke & Knights, 2015), navigating shifting expectations, and the constant pressure to make the 'right' decisions, which adds to their vulnerability.

Attachment to work happens in many ways, and can be related to different aspects of academic work, to specific work groups and projects, or to individual career progression and notoriety. Several informants tend to focus on their affections and enjoyments in academic work, manifesting as personal favourite projects in many different areas and shapes, as for example to enjoy the space of expressing oneself through teaching.

I would say it's the world's best job, an incredible freedom of action. For the generation I am in and have been in, you get the opportunity

to be on stage and express yourself, which is a significant part of the profession. I know I am at the right place when I meet my 300 students in the lecture hall, and I think that you must understand that situation if you consider this profession. Whether you are in front of 300 students or 300 research colleagues, you must be able to handle that room and enjoy it. Feel that it's fun! And when I see it in young people who are interested in this, that they are so strong, then I can say: This is damn fun! (male senior lecturer, University A)

However, the question remains how to handle vulnerability when their status – contrary to expectations – gradually erodes and career paths are progressively being closed off. One lecturer told us how his engagement for pedagogical leadership was a career choice that was once lauded and encouraged in the department but nowadays increasingly a source of inner musings over career opportunities lost:

In hindsight, if I had focused on my career and thought in those terms, I would have invested much more in writing published articles and prioritized everything for that. It would have been much better for my career, to suppress my commitment [to teaching]. But I didn't do that for many years; instead, I worked to create a good educational program. I know that it doesn't carry much weight even if [the managers] say it does. I worked at [a teaching campus] for a long time after my PhD and had those responsibilities, for family reasons – while all the others started writing their articles... I was responsible for 400 students. There was no problem with that, but it's like there are different groups; there are those who like to create interesting educational programs and those who prioritize other things. (male senior lecturer, University A)

The elusiveness in *Academica* makes it challenging to predict what will be valued in the long run. Conducting a thorough assessment of how to invest one's time wisely to mitigate vulnerability necessitates substantial reflections and identity work. Living in a projectified culture implies constantly engaging in research programs, self-promotion, networking, being open to learning and acquiring new knowledge, and being present where important things are happening (Jensen et al., 2016; Lewis & Decuyper, 2023).

If this is approached with affect and enjoyment in mind, it implies selecting what projects to go for and to abstain from others – but also to select collaborators based on relational preferences. The attachment-seeking academics therefore locate their engagements into "micro-spaces" where they feel valued, can develop professionally, and sustain their sense of autonomy. In these spaces it is common to contemplate how academic practices can be redefined, not only as avenues for personal development and a source of nourishment, but also as a means of integrating professional duties with personal satisfaction – thereby fostering fulfilling relationships with both students and colleagues, all the while advancing one's career:

Department requirements does not matter, it's just my own interest. There are several others in my research group who share the same interest, so we connect and work together when we apply [for project grants]. And perhaps we feel that we don't want too much teaching. We have a lot of joint teaching, which means our courses are quite large, with many students, and it's somewhat deficient for us. It's these things that lead to... we want to earn merits and maybe become associate professors and then... (male senior lecturer, University D)

To focus on these affectionate attachments to work, informants emphasise the importance of exploring tactical possibilities for managing academic responsibilities that constantly demand more and lead to conflicts, unreasonable workloads, and impossible situations in a more thoughtful manner (see the first theme and Johansson et al., 2024). Here, we note that some informants find projects to offer alternative routes through which they can navigate the academic terrain and perform episodic resistance (Sadeghi et al., 2024). For example, our informant "Sara" (University E) suggests that writing a book, instead of

getting lost in article writing, can be more personally enriching. Writing books unfolds as an opportunity to 'broaden one's perspective,' contemplate the purpose of research, and distance oneself from the performance-based system and the vulnerability entailed in 'measuring oneself,' thus detaching from the 'publish or perish' practice. Engaging with projects in these ways may not imply radically stepping off the beaten path, but it nevertheless seems to allow our informants to use projects as a detour, providing space for reflection and approaching knowledge production with creativity, curiosity, and joy.

A more radical way of nurturing attachment to academic work is by avoiding colonisation, e.g., ignoring organisational schemes of 'billed hours' and instead structuring the day, week, month, or semester based on personal priorities while disregarding detailed instructions from managers. Several informants argue that one should not fixate on time but on what one wants to achieve or has achieved, focusing on a more qualitative dimension.

Additionally, one should refrain from comparing oneself to others, which is not always easy given the ubiquity of bibliometric data and individualised performance measurement schemes. Instead of competing with colleagues, they can be framed as intellectual partners who enrich academic activities, such as book circles, and seminars that are organised in ways that are less production-oriented. Altogether, this can be seen as a tactic for keeping vulnerability at bay by embracing it and situating oneself in a collaborative context where shame—defined as the painful feeling or experience of believing one is flawed in comparison to others—is dispersed (Johansson & Wickström, 2023).

The tactic is to view the job less as a calling—which is an affective attachment to work colonised by efficiency-seeking managerialism—and more as a means of breadwinning. In essence, one punches in, does what needs to be done, punches out, receives compensation for it, and spends as much time as possible on enjoyable matters. This can be related to the recently discussed phenomenon of 'quiet quitting,' which describes the concept of not literally quitting one's job but simply fulfilling the expected duties of the position without going above and beyond what is required (Scheyett, 2023).

One informant describes how the system no longer understands the "preconditions for doing good research and education," implying that one needs to see through the system to find alternative ways of working. For example, developing a new educational program, is no longer seen as a merit in the CV according to one of our informants, which means to set one's own rules and to mirror recognition and worth in one's own mirror instead of in the eyes of others:

I don't think we have enough of a research-focused culture in the department for us to develop a macho culture... So, it's not quite the same atmosphere, or what to say. But I perceive that when my co-writer talks about her other university, there seem to be much more of a culture of male competition there – clad in rhetoric on academic work as a calling and that you have to work around the clock to be a true researcher and so on. Of course, I work a lot in spurts and so on, but I work quite systematically. We have probably set it up that way. Even though I think about research on weekends and such, and I read books and so on, it's probably not those kinds of boundaries. No, we have decided that we don't work those insane all-nighters. (woman senior lecturer, University E)

This highlights the importance of perceiving reality for what it is: that only tangible achievements count in one's CV/credentials, that promotion to full professor may never happen, that a seminar can be enjoyable and interesting without necessarily resulting in a published paper, that the most rewarding relationships with colleagues and students may not be the most productive ones.

To conclude, what constitutes attachment to work and careers for the academic projectified self is a complex matter. Individual academics have different 'sources' of engagement: some commit to collective or organisational matters, some engage in small groups or projects, and others focus on the machinations of their individual careers. Academic

work, in this sense, encompasses several different roles simultaneously (Griffin, 2022), allowing academics to pursue varied interests and priorities.

At the same time, academic career systems value these different ‘roles’ very differently, and many of our informants express both regret and hesitation regarding their forms of attachment to work and the consequences thereof, in terms of unfulfilled career prospects, being overworked, or spending excessive time in dysfunctional social environments. In line with van den Brink et al. (2016), many men expect their careers to unfold well, while many women merely hope that they will, a dynamic that tends to reinforce organisational cultures in which men’s performances are inflated and their weaknesses downplayed.

5. Discussion

In this article, we build on the concept of the ‘projectified self’ (Kalf, 2017; Berglund et al., 2020) as a means of conceptualising identification with the ethos of societal projectification and its consequences among academics. The emancipatory interest implies a focus on the consequences of invoking projects as a discursive formation in society, particularly regarding whose interests are served or not served by reproducing the status quo in the field (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil et al., 2016).

In this section, we will expand on this by discussing the projectified self not as a singular or homogeneous subject position, but rather as a complex amalgamation of identities and practices that are continuously evolving and fraught with tensions related to both gender and academic professionalism(s). These tensions—fueled by traditions in academia that emphasise individualism, work fragmentation, and self-promotion (Clarke & Knights, 2015; Griffin, 2022; Nästesjö, 2023)—serve to reinforce and exacerbate existential vulnerability and gendered inequalities in diverse ways. The variation of subject positions identified in the previous section, along with their tensions and vulnerabilities, is summarised in Table 2.

The projectified self – seen as an urge on individuals in neoliberal society to identify with The projectified self—seen as an urge for individuals in a neoliberal society to identify with self-control, self-

improvement, self-commercialisation, life compartmentalisation, and being driven by deadlines (Berglund et al., 2020)—appears in different ways in our empirical study. The three variations of the projectified self identified are interrelated in the sense that they can be expressed by the same individuals at different times and under varying circumstances, yet they still represent distinct modes of identification. Each position involves tensions between different aspects of worth, which imply gendered vulnerabilities.

The career-seeking academic primarily relates to the constant need for self-improvement as an academic—being simultaneously aware of both one’s individual liberty as a necessary condition for academic professionalism and the organisational responsibilities involved in being a senior faculty member. This fundamental tension recurs in an endless stream of ‘project situations’ in which academics navigate between detachment and involvement, interpreting these situations in relation to the self—navigations that unfold in a context of gendered expectations. The ‘masculine projectified self’ is characterised by an emphasis on self-improvement through distancing oneself from the organisation, selecting tasks and working relationships rather than simply accepting them, and thereby accruing the resources needed to mitigate the vulnerability of stagnating careers. In contrast, the ‘female projectified self’ is often held responsible for being relationally accountable to colleagues (De Coster & Zanoni, 2019), providing low-status service work, and avoiding the perception of being a selfish ‘queen bee’. For women focused on an academic career, this means hard work—and more work. They need to take on relational responsibilities while also proving themselves in research projects, collaborations, and the classroom. Both men and women in this position seek to develop long-term strategies to cope with potential vulnerabilities; however, the strategies are gendered, enabling men to focus on work undisturbed while women must also demonstrate their worth in relational terms.

The recognition-seeking academic occupies a more vulnerable position in general, as it is closely connected to the urge for individuals in a neoliberal society to be seen, build high-status networks, promote themselves, and receive attention, rewards, and accolades. This position is fraught with tensions relating not only to the challenges of standing out as an individual while being dependent on academic institutions but

Table 2 Variations of the academic projectified self as identified in the empirical study.

	Projectified tensions between individual liberty and organizational limitations	Transitoriness of professional worth and recognition	Projectified attachments to academic work
<i>Variants of the projectified self</i>	The (dedicated) career-seeking academic.	The (vulnerable) recognition-seeking academic.	The (affectionate) attachment-searching academic.
<i>Practices in pursuing worth</i>	Balancing the tightropes between intellectual liberty and organizational demands through projects, e.g. teaching responsibilities, academic assignments, one’s own research.	Promoting and prolonging one’s own status in relation to the (low-status?) university. Narrating oneself as a high-esteemed academic who made it on his own; against all odds. Distancing oneself to the search for academic appreciation. Narrating oneself as beside and beyond academic competitiveness.	Focusing on their affections and enjoyments in academic work, manifesting as projects in many different areas and shapes. Attachments formed mainly to relational micro-spaces in which senses of companionship, recognition and autonomy are nurtured.
<i>Projectification</i>	‘A project’ is an improvement-oriented condition beyond oneself that may require endless commitment and justifies detachment from workplace matters and relations. Projects are also career-related personal improvement conditions that can be employed to achieve individual liberties. The relation between individual and organization ‘happens’ through projects and is renegotiated in each new project.	Projects are sources of worth and recognition as well as manifestations thereof – rather than organizational affiliation. At the same time, this worth and recognition is transitory and requires engagement in new projects to be upheld. For some, this implies accelerated projectification – constantly adding new qualities and courses of action to one’s persona. Others pursue unprojectification of academic work, limiting work in line with organizational regulations, inner sense of worth and recognition instead of competition.	Projects are compartmentalized responses to a responsibility of oneself to oneself – to use work as a resource to focus on attachments and enjoyments. Constructing projects around collective explorations, intellectual engagement and curiosity that adds quality to academic life – thereby also constructing relational micro-spaces. But – for some – also undertaking boring and harmful projects based in a sense of calling.
<i>Tensions and vulnerabilities</i>	Individual liberty ⇔ organizational responsibilities. Improvement of self ⇔ improving the workplace. Pursuing professionalism ⇔ engaging with others. Selecting relations ⇔ accepting relations.	Enduring worth and recognition ⇔ transitory worth and recognition. Profession-based worth and recognition ⇔ organizational status in relation to metrics. Limitless work ⇔ regulated work. Inner sense of worth and recognition ⇔ external worth based on competition and comparison.	Personal preferences ⇔ organizational priorities. Affection for work ⇔ self-harming naivety. Meaningful micro-spaces ⇔ irrelevant micro-spaces. Work as calling ⇔ work as enjoyment.

also to the inherent instability and transitoriness of worth gained through scholarly performances. This position unfolds through a series of ‘project situations’ that each offer opportunities for self-commercialisation, for appearing productive and professional, and for attracting reputation, admiration, and remuneration. Here, the ‘masculine projectified self’ leans towards accelerated projectification—constantly attempting to transform existing opportunities into recognition experiences while keeping ‘the market’ and high-status networks informed of all new endeavours, enterprises, and achievements linked to oneself. To the extent that there is a ‘feminine projectified self’ in this respect, it may be someone who realises the overwhelming vulnerabilities involved in recognition-seeking and therefore distances herself from academic careers, un-projectifying her own work situation and attempting to build an inner sense of recognition and worth—at the cost of being perceived as lacking potential, promise, and status among peers. While men in this position seek ways to sustain recognition despite constantly changing conditions and expectations, women more frequently seek ways out of the hamster wheel.

Finally, *the attachment-seeking academic* occupies a position centred on the affective dimensions of work—that is, the emotional and relational experiences of academic teaching, collaborating, reading, writing, and so forth. This position allows projects to emerge as compartmentalised responses to the responsibility to oneself to pursue enjoyable experiences and avoid negative ones—by forming meaningful ‘micro-spaces’ from positive attachments and evading what is perceived as boring and relationally harmful. The difference between masculine and feminine selves is that the former tend to gravitate towards homosocial attachments and groupings that are often widely appreciated, whereas the latter often find themselves in peripheral and somewhat ostracised collectives. Masculine and feminine projectified selves, therefore, differ significantly in terms of their approach to dealing with vulnerability—accepting its presence while finding alternative projects, negotiating, evading, and avoiding the pressure of performance-based projects (cf. Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024).

This variation across different ‘versions’ of the academic projectified self indeed indicates that projectified selves take many forms with varying emphases. In this sense, our study echoes earlier research on academics’ identity construction (e.g., Clarke et al., 2012; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Bristow et al., 2017; Nästesjö, 2023). We also find, in line with previous research on gendered inequalities in academia, that masculine notions of academic work and career progression tend to be more highly valued, thus justifying workplace cultures that harbour an uneven distribution of work and multiple vulnerabilities for women academics (Loveday, 2018; De Coster & Zanoni, 2019; Bone, 2021; Griffin, 2022; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2024). Conversely, we find that women may be in a better position to experiment with alternative projects; not being in the spotlight may have its advantages. What the perspective of the projectified self adds to these literatures can be summarised in two main arguments.

First, the notion of the projectified self urges us to consider the performativity of projects (Lindgren et al., 2014; Kalf, 2022) when conducting emancipatory project studies. In contemporary society, individuals are expected to live through projects and become defined by them to be worthy and responsible citizens (Jensen et al., 2016)—which means that studies of both the organisational conditions for work and the individual experiences of work need to relate to the fact that these often appear as streams of projects, situations, episodes, and events. The perspective that individuals are ‘carriers’ of projects, while also *being and embodying* those projects, may imply unforeseen and neglected consequences for our understanding of organisation, including the possibilities and practices of exercising episodic power and resistance (Sadeghi et al., 2024). In the study presented here, we demonstrate that work, careers, relationships, recognition, and organisational attachments can be analysed in this way, which opens up opportunities for more diverse notions of professional subject positions—and for understanding the complex interplay between work environment, careers,

personal development, workplace relations, leadership, gender, and diversity. Projectified selves that navigate between liberties and limitations in their daily academic work, strive to uphold and gain professional worth, and develop attachments to work that align with their current ‘project portfolios’ will, at an aggregate level, both contribute to and undermine managerialist notions of university governance.

Second, the projectified self serves as a lens that enables us to consider the tensions and vulnerabilities faced by individuals in a neoliberal society—resulting from various forms of precarity and individual risks, as well as from gender structures and other intersectionalities (Cicmil et al., 2016). The projectified self is a subject position that is traditionally masculine, built on individualism, competition, performance orientation, and selective relational responsibilities—in a societal context where governance systems and ideologies support individual self-responsibility, risk-taking, and obedience (Loveday, 2018; De Coster & Zanoni, 2019). Men are indeed vulnerable in this milieu, as worth in a projectified society is evasive and fleeting—but women are even more so, as additional expectations concerning relational responsibilities, humble career progression, and work as a calling come into play. Conversely, women may have more leeway to negotiate alternative projectified paths, but doing so also jeopardises their place in the academic projectified order.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we set out to advance emancipatory project studies through a study of how academic professionals relate to the gendered culture of projectification in crafting themselves and their careers. From this study, we propose to conceptualise the projectified self not as a singular or homogeneous subject position but rather as a complex amalgamation of identifications and practices that are continuously evolving and fraught with tensions related to both gender and academic professionalism(s). These tensions serve to reinforce and exacerbate existential vulnerability and gendered inequalities in diverse ways, highlighting the intricate dynamics at play within academic settings. Acknowledging the prevalence of professional traditions in academia that prioritise individualism, work fragmentation, and self-promotion (Clarke & Knights, 2015), we also explore how projectified selves navigate vulnerability—an aspect often repressed, filled with shame, and internalised among enterprising individuals (cf. Scharff, 2016; Shahjahan, 2020; Zembylas, 2024).

In relation to the emerging stream of research that investigates projects as a human condition and the consequences of the culture of projectification (Barondeau & Hobbs, 2019; Berglund, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2020; Cicmil, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2016; Jensen, Thuesen, & Galdi, 2016; Kalf, 2017), there are certainly several limitations to this study that may be ameliorated in further lines of inquiry. One such line would be to revisit the notion of ‘organisation’ from the perspective of the projectified self: are organisations increasingly perceived by workers as fragmented, event-based platforms for their personal aspirations and projects, and what would be the consequences of this shift? Such an agenda could draw on recent theorising about temporal complexity in organisations (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2024; Ika, Söderlund, & Pinto, 2025) and the implications of the periodisation of organisational life for power structures (Sadeghi, Islam, & Van Lent, 2024; Zembylas, 2024). A second issue would be to apply the theoretical notions of recognition and worth (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Tweedie et al., 2019; Nästesjö, 2023) to projectified selves in various contexts. Are recognition and worth indeed becoming increasingly transitory and unreliable, and what would that entail? A third line of inquiry could investigate the performativity of projectification (Kalf, 2022)—specifically, how individuals in projectified cultures (re)construct identities and invoke new discursive notions of what it means to appear professional. A fourth area of research would involve expanding critical inquiry on projectification to encompass other intersectionalities (Berglund et al., 2020), such as class, ethnicity, or age, as well as

applying the gender perspective to other societal sectors. This would aim to achieve more nuanced understandings of how projectification and neoliberalism cooperate in urging workers and individuals in contemporary societies to perform as self-controlling, self-improving, self-commercialising, life-compartmentalising, and deadline-driven human beings.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Packendorff Johann: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Berglund Karin:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Lindgren Monica:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

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