

Project Managers on the Edge: Liminality and Identity in the Management of Technical Work

Abstract

This paper explores the consequences of 'corporate professionalisation' through an analysis of the experiences of technical specialists adopting the position of project manager. Shifts towards 'corporate professionalism' in this and other occupations result in a tension between competing logics, the logic of the traditional profession versus another focused on delivery of market value for clients/employers. Living with this tension places project managers in a 'liminal' position in two ways; they find themselves in a liminal position created first by the transition from a technical specialist role into a managerial role and second as they occupy the space between the often opposing institutions of profession and employing organisation. Drawing on empirical data gathered within a project-based industry and referring to Gouldner's 'cosmopolitan' and 'local' typologies, we explore the 'identity work' engaged in by project managers as they attempt to creatively negotiate the tensions inherent in the role.

Introduction

The knowledge economy has been characterised by the proliferation of new 'expert occupations' (Brint, 1994; Reed, 1996; Fincham, 2012) many of which are organising into collectives increasingly labelled as 'corporate professions'. These corporate professions (Muzio et al, 2011;) comprise a mix of characteristics inherited from the traditional professions (Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990; Johnson, 1972) such as knowledge-based enclosure and a commitment to public good, and contemporary characteristics such as proactive engagement with markets and an orientation towards commercialisation (Paton et al, 2013). Occupations emerging as sub-disciplines of management are particularly noteworthy in this regard, with many such as marketing (Enright, 2006), consulting (Sturdy, 2011) and human resource management (Wright, 2008) having some success in achieving recognition and respect as an occupation while developing some form of professional self-organisation and autonomy. Corporate professions thus trade their knowledge assets while regulating and maintaining standards of practice but do so while working for or within the corporation (Muzio et al, 2011). In doing so, corporate professions are hybrid in nature (Noordegraaf, 2007) as they embody this tension between logics (Hodgson et al, in press).

With a codified body of knowledge, increasingly influential professional bodies and growing recognition as a value-adding managerial specialism (Crawford et al, 2006; Morris, 1997), project

management is typical of these new corporate professions. This recent professionalization of project management (Hodgson, 2002; Paton, 2013) has resulted in a rapidly-expanding occupation populated by a growing number of practitioners where most have joined the profession later in their careers and where all are employed to manage project work that typically entails complex and multi-disciplinary technical work. As such, project managers find themselves forced to work within contexts characterised by a multiplicity of often contradictory pressures which simultaneously pull them in different directions (Beech et al, 2012) and where career mobility due to work patterns dominated by short-term assignments is common. The result in such conditions is typically intense 'identity work' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) as practitioners occupy a liminal position, between groups and competing demands, and seek to construct a coherent identity respected across communities.

Our intention in this research is to explore the identity work engaged in by project managers, whereby they seek to reconcile the uncertainties inherent in their liminal position. This will be done by drawing on an extensive empirical study of project managers working within multi-national, project-oriented companies. The objective of this paper is therefore to explore, through an analysis of the alternative discourses played out within (and between) individual accounts of working identity, how project managers seek to construct identities that allow them to reconcile the inherent tensions brought by the liminal positions they find themselves in.

This paper will proceed as follows; a summary of the literature on cosmopolitan and local identities is given before the project management profession is introduced and critically discussed in relation to liminality. Then an empirical examination of the identity work of project managers in three firms is presented through an analytical frame built around discourses of local and cosmopolitan orientation. Finally, conclusions are drawn on the implications of this for the project management profession and for our understanding of the pressures upon employees in similar liminal positions in organisations.

Locals, Cosmopolitans and Liminality

"Identity work" is described as the process whereby 'people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 626). Much research in this area focuses upon organisational settings and the formation of an individual's work identity in this context. Here, discourses represent resources which can be employed to create workplace identities which may or may not comply with organizational goals. Clearly, the discourses that tie people to social structures are not freely chosen or autonomously created by individuals - rather, they are constituted and promoted, often strategically and collectively, by employers and also professional associations. They

are also inscribed in organisational career structures and cultural frameworks with the deliberate intention of regulating identity in organisations. Hence work identities are “constituted within organizationally based discursive regimes which offer positions, or epistemological spaces, for individuals and groups to occupy” (Clarke et al, 2009: 325). This approach therefore views work identity as both “something over which struggles take place and with which stratagems are advanced” (Jenkins, 1996, in Kuhn, 2006: 1340) and as a vital arena of struggle within the workplace. It is argued that the intensity and persistence of such struggles, and the identity work they necessitate, varies between organisational contexts, differing between relatively stable contexts and those marked by complexity, fragmentation and change (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). It can also be heightened in response to tensions that simultaneously pull people in two (or more) directions (Beech et al, 2012: 39).

Identity work is thus particularly intensive for subjects deemed to exist in “liminal” positions (Tansley and Tietze, 2013). Liminality as a concept is originally associated with the anthropological writings of Van Gennep at the turn of the century (1960) examining ‘rites of passage’ in rural societies, such as initiation or marriage rituals. In social science, it gained a new lease of life following Turner’s (1969) articulation of three stages to the rite of passage; separation, liminality and incorporation. In this formulation, while separation serves to detach the individual from a particular role or activity, and incorporation serves to re-position the same individual in a new, stable and recognised role or status, liminality offers a useful description of the “social limbo” individuals enter between these two phases. Hence ‘liminal’ subjects endure “the ambiguous condition of ‘being between’, at the limits of existing social structures and where new structures are emerging” (Tempest and Starkey, 2004; 509), where normal rules, routines and institutions are suspended, unclear, contradictory or indeed entirely absent. This concept of liminality has been effectively deployed in studies of work to explore a wide range of subjects, including temporary workers (Garsten, 1999), consultants (Sturdy et al. 2006, 2009), professionals (Zabusky and Barley, 1997), creative workers (Beech et al, 2012) and workers in inter-organizational networks (Ellis and Ybema, 2010). The ambiguity and implied instability of the liminal position is argued to be unsettling and disruptive to the individual and the community, but conversely it has been suggested that it can also provide potentially creative spaces for individuals (Garsten, 1999).

A key question in research around liminality relates to the persistence or permanency of the liminal state - or, for Borg, whether liminality is considered as a ‘process’ or as a ‘position’ or ‘space’ (Borg, 2014). Beech summarises this distinction as between liminality “understood in the anthropological sense to be a *temporary* transition through which identity is reconstructed” and/or liminality “as a more *longitudinal* experience of ambiguity and in-between-ness within a changeful context.” (Beech,

2011: 288, emphasis added). For some, this latter notion of persistent or enduring liminality risks losing the essentially transitory nature of liminality in the original work. However, others contend that it is precisely this increasingly-common *persistence* of liminal spaces or positions (Garsten, 1999; Sturdy et al, 2006; Ellis and Ybema, 2010) which renders liminality such a potent concept for understanding the experience of temporary workers, contractors, consultants, expatriates and others. This work has rendered important insights into the implications of the stability or otherwise of liminality, while shedding light on the simultaneous attractiveness, discomfort and liberation implied by liminality (see, for example, Zabusky and Barley, 1997; Tempest and Starkey, 2004).

An older, but related, debate on identity, belonging and boundaries might frame similar debates in terms of the local or cosmopolitan orientation of individuals in society, tracing back to Robert Merton's "Social Theory and Social Structure" (1968), which itself draws on Tonnies' much earlier distinction between *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*. Akin to discussions on liminality, research on this theme addresses the conflicting pressures on identity formation across contexts. For the field of organisation studies, it is Merton's student Alvin Gouldner who is most typically cited on the theme of localism and cosmopolitanism. Gouldner (1957) develops this concept more fully in an organisational setting, differentiating cosmopolitan and local latent identities among college employees; cosmopolitans, he suggests, are "low on loyalty to the employing organization, high on commitment to specialized role skills, and likely to use an outer reference group orientation", while locals are the inverse, "high on loyalty to the employing organization, low on commitment to specialized role skills, and likely to use an inner reference group orientation" (Gouldner, 1957: 290).

Importantly for Gouldner, a key implication of this research is how it illuminates "the tensions between the modern organization's needs for loyalty and expertise" (Gouldner, 1958: 466) and resulting occupational conflicts. Shepard develops this argument, differentiating cosmopolitan and local orientations among R&D scientists as follows; "The former are oriented toward success as members of their profession, and their interest in the company is limited to its adequacy as a provider of facilities for them to pursue their professional work. Since they are productive, they may be valuable to the company, but such value is an almost accidental by-product of their work. The locals are good company men, but their interest is likely to be less in their work than in their advancement in the company" (1956: 298). Certain authors articulate this suspicion of the cosmopolitan further, such as Raelin (1986) who argues that "the cosmopolitan-type professional (...) is at great risk of engaging in deviant/adaptive behaviour (with) the most deleterious effects on workforce productivity" (1986: 1126), and prescribes techniques to accommodate such valuable but untrustworthy cosmopolitan professionals in organisational settings.

More recently, a more celebratory discourse around cosmopolitanism has predominated management academic debates, exemplified by Kanter's description of the 'industry cosmopolitan'¹ "for whom a global network of industry-specific or professional contacts throughout the world supplants 'local' identity" (1995: 84). Cosmopolitans are, in Kanter's words, 'supralocal'; "There are two elements of this: the ability of 'cosmopolitans' to 'transcend' place, and their possession of 'competence' or 'portable skills'" (Halsall, 2009: S139). Kanter equates this positioning with choice and independence of thought, presenting this in triumphant terms; "Local nativists value loyalties over choices, preferring to preserve distinctions and protect their own group. Cosmopolitans characteristically try to break through barriers and overcome limits; nativists characteristically try to preserve and even erect new barriers, most often through political means" (Kanter, 1995: 23–24). Here, then, the cosmopolitan is heroic; broad-minded, externally networked, unshackled by trivial local politics and informed by a higher set of values and universalisable knowledge. Similarly positive, if less celebratory, accounts can be found in Zabusky and Barley's (1997) study of industrial scientists, which highlights the ability of certain scientists to act as translators and negotiators between employer and scientific community thanks to their cosmopolitan orientation.

Below we explore what relevance notions of local and cosmopolitan orientation might have for debates on liminality focusing on the identity work and discursive position of the contemporary project manager.

Project Manager as Liminar

With the emergence of project management as an established occupation in the last 50 years, and the increased reliance of modern organisations on projectified work, the project manager has recently come to represent a relatively legitimate organisational position, affording a - perhaps precarious - level of meaning and security to those adopting this position.

The emergence of project management as a distinct role and occupation in the mid-Twentieth century owes much to technological advances in the 1940s/50s in engineering and construction (Morris, 1997), which led to the establishment of particular techniques in various 'megaprojects' in the US (Hughes, 1998). In much of the latter half of the last century, the field was dominated by engineering, in particular the defence industry, construction and latterly IS/IT. Since then, the tools, techniques and principles of project management have been widely promoted as a vital capability in all uncertain and knowledge-intensive business environments, leading to increasing adoption of project management methodologies in new sectors, its employment as part of business change interventions, as well as

benefiting from New Public Management and the increased public sector reliance upon fixed-term public-private partnerships and targeted funding (Hodgson, 2002; Cicmil et al, 2009). The late 20th century saw collective efforts to establish some form of professional status for the occupation through the formation of professional associations in the USA, UK and elsewhere (Hodgson and Muzio, 2011), the largest of which is the US-based Project Management Institute (PMI) and, in the UK, the Association for Project Management (APM). One distinguishing feature of project management is the effectiveness with which various professional associations have managed to construct 'Bodies of Knowledge' which claim to reflect "the ontology of the profession; the set of words, relationships and meanings that describe the philosophy of project management' (Morris et al, 2000: 156), shoring up the occupations sense of a distinctive identity. Project management combines managerial and technical responsibilities, drawing on a proprietary body of knowledge and associated practitioner methodologies to plan, monitor and coordinate projects in a range of sectors.

Project managers are largely employed within large organisations, where they help to realise the objectives of their employers, with only a minority serving such organisations from independent and relatively small consultancies (Morris, 1997; Zwerman and Thomas, 2001). Project management represents both a work identity and, increasingly, a professional identity. The former locates the project manager in an organisation, with a recognised job role subject to the demands of an employer, while the latter locates the project manager within a broader occupational community of practice, not tied to their employer or occupational position at a particular point in time. Construction of a professional identity, above and beyond a work identity, may often offer a route for career progression and enhanced status/rewards, but equally importantly, it offers a source of validation which is not directly dependent upon the employer or the bureaucratic structure within which an individual operates. That said, embracing a professional identity may enmesh an individual within a more complex disciplinary technology (Fournier, 1999) under the appearance of agency and personal development.

Given this position and status, project managers may be described as 'liminal' in two significant ways (Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Watson, 2009; Borg, 2014). Firstly, liminality may refer to occupational/organisation position. Known as the 'accidental profession', project management is rarely an occupation of first choice (at least historically). Rather it is a job role and later, for some, a professional identity developed in mid- or late-career. Historically, this has been a standard career path for technical specialists such as engineers (Hodgson, Paton and Cicmil, 2011), but increasingly the project management role offers a route into management across almost all industries (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). However this route to management does not provide a clean break from the

responsibilities and activities of the previous role. Often, for the project manager, the work engaged in changes little as project-based responsibilities simply supplement existing technical responsibilities. Even where greater role separation is afforded, the nature of project-based work often requires significant involvement in detailed technical tasks which for many project managers is a return to their previous technical profession.

Secondly, liminality may refer to the tensions surfaced in discussions of the new corporate profession itself (Muzio et al, 2011; Paton et al, 2013) where loyalty to the profession, and its assurance through knowledge enclosure and affiliation with the wider community of practice, is in conflict with loyalty to the employing company and the need to practice within, and add value to, a particular business. The former offers the 'cosmopolitan' project manager a form of existential security detached from the vicissitudes and disruptions of project-based organisational life by positioning the subject within the professional rather than organisational field. The latter offers the 'local' project manager a more familiar environment where historical relationships and knowledge carried over from the previous technical professions are valued, and offers the employer a worker who is loyal and/or tied to the local context and organisational career structures.

The project manager is thus 'twice-liminal'; first, caught in the space between identification as a cosmopolitan and as a locally oriented professional; and second, caught in the transition between technical professional and managerial professional. Project managers thus fulfil Borg's (2014) two criteria for liminality; existing in conditions of both transience and structural ambiguity. Our interest here is to explore the identity work of project managers, defining the ways in which actors' work to create a coherent sense of self in response to the conflicting scripts, roles, and subject positions encountered. In doing so, we hope to shed some light on the persistence of liminality and the impact of this on those occupying liminal positions in contemporary corporate professions.

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature, using semi-structured interviews with a broad sample of project managers working across a range of organisations in the UK defence industry. Fieldwork took place in 2010-11 within three of the largest defence/engineering companies, which here have been called 'RadarCo', 'DefenceCo' and 'MarineCo'. RadarCo is one of the world's largest companies designing and producing radars; DefenceCo operates in all defence markets, land, sea and air, producing a variety of electro mechanical systems, products and platforms; MarineCo operates primarily in the warship and submarine construction and maintenance business. All three companies utilise project management as one of their prime organising methodologies. Although specific job titles varies, all interviewees

were permanent project managers (not secondees or temporary holders of project management responsibilities) of varying seniority and levels of experience. In all, 39 project managers were interviewed, chosen to include a cross-section of ages (from 24 to 63 years), levels of experience (from 1 to 35 years) and grades of seniority (from first role to project director). Table 1 provides further details.

Table 1 – Characteristics of interviewed project managers

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|---------------|--|--|
| SEX | M | F | | | | | | |
| | 35 | 4 | | | | | | |
| MEMBER OF PROFESSIONAL BODY | YES | NO | | | | | | |
| | 14 | 25 | | | | | | |
| AGE | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 | >60 | | | |
| | 1 | 10 | 17 | 9 | 2 | | | |
| YEARS OF PM EXPERIENCE | <5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 | 21-25 | >25 | | |
| | 10 | 10 | 11 | 3 | 4 | 1 | | |
| GRADE OF SENIORITY | PROJECT/PROGRAM MANAGER | | SENIOR P/PM | | PROJECT/PROGRAM DIRECTOR | | | |
| | 21 | | 15 | | 3 | | | |

Semi-structured interviews were used to provide flexible and detailed accounts through the joint construction of meaning in a social encounter, following Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) concept of the 'active interview'. Through active interviewing, our aim was not to extract information or views from a passive subject but to stimulate active narrative production, intentionally provoking interviewees to articulate and reflect upon their position. In addition, following Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), we approached the interviews not as a simple reporting of opinions and attitudes, but instead as a social encounter which provokes, explores and challenges identity construction. The research questions for these interviews were derived from a review of literature on project management, professionalization and identity work. The interview schedule focused on the following broad themes; career and identity ("When/why did you become a project manager?"); project management knowledge and practice ("What makes an effective project manager?"); the status/credibility of project management ("How is project management regarded by your colleagues and peers?"); and the employing context of project management ("How does the nature of the organisation effect the way you construct your role?").

Interviews followed a standard protocol generated by researchers, lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours and were digitally recorded, then transcribed, anonymised and collated. Data analysis was an iterative process using NVivo software, whereby axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998)

was conducted in sequence, before categories were examined for discursive coherence. Core themes such as local and cosmopolitan orientation emerged from the analysis itself and were not used in advance to inform the interview schedule. Two coders jointly analysed the transcripts through an open coding strategy, and through axial coding, categories were created to group coded data. We then returned to the interviews to analyse how these discursive positions were presented in individual accounts of identity and practice.

Analysis

A number of key themes emerged from the research interviews on project manager identity and practice, which we have grouped under two broad categories; first, *community membership*, contrasting the value of participation in wider communities of practice with the value of contextual knowledge and local relationships; and secondly, *knowledge and skills*, relating to the transferability of PM knowledge and practices, the value of training versus experience, and the importance of strategic vision versus operational effectiveness. Below, we summarise each of these categories.

Community Membership

Several PMs interviewed, predominantly the younger PMs, were very active in the professional body (here, the APM), believing that the profession and the transferable skills it offered represented a vehicle for career progression.

'I follow the APM closely, I'm a member of the APM, etc. I'm keen to maintain that and continue that to establish a career path for people, a profession in its own right that has transferable skills no matter what sector you're in.'

Project Manager, RadarCo.

This was taken further by some relating the progress of the profession with their own career success. This PM cites the pursuit of a Royal Charter for the APM as a proxy which would increase the cachet of the profession and therefore individual PMs improving their standing in relation to those of the other more established professions.

'I think it (Royal Chartership of the APM) will be a very good thing because then I think it would give that final stamp, you know, to be a chartered project manager is, you know, you can stand alongside a chartered accountant or a chartered engineer... and it recognises that project management has a distinctly different set of skills than the other things.'

Project Manager, RadarCo.

This belief in recognising the importance of the occupation and increasing its standing amongst other occupations was a recurring theme, indicating a cosmopolitan orientation (with some project managers attempting to gain status through the profession).

This, however, was countered by the views of others who indicated a more local orientation, some still reverting to their previous occupations and claiming that their association with the company rather than the profession of project management were important. In our sample, three quarters of project managers interviewed were not members of any professional association, and several, especially older and longer-serving staff, appeared uncertain about the value of professionalism, or of affiliation with a professional body. One statement made by an experienced project manager in relation to the APM typified a widely-held view;

'I'm not that sure what (the professional association) are all about. What are they doing? What are they saying? What are they giving me that's going to make me better? What am I going to learn?'

Programme Manager, RadarCo.

These PMs searched for opportunities to prove their familiarity with the more detailed and technical aspects of the projects they managed.

'The way I run my projects, I'm hands on. You know, designers and that, when they go onto site the way we work here, basically, we've got to chase the designers up to get our projects to the point that ... you understand? And, my way of approach is I go with them down on site and I'll say "what's the problem with that?" and I try and work with them to get the design out quicker.'

Project Manager, MarineCo.

For others, effectiveness as a PM is firmly and inevitably grounded in strong personal affiliations developed over a long period in the local context.

'It's based on knowing the guys. It's based on working with the guys for years. You build up relationships, some good, some bad, and that's how you get work done. So, it's getting to know who to go to and them giving you enough respect and doing it because they know you.'

Project Manager, MarineCo.

Those PMs who prioritised their association with the company over their association with the professional group also sought alignments with others in their previous occupation. Another PM who had worked as a design engineer claimed:

'I'm more closely aligned to my team than to the group of project managers. Strangely I'm still aligned to the engineering team. I recognise them as a group.'

Project Manager, RadarCo.

While these PMs did not fully reject the professional project management group they tended to view it in a more limited way seeing it as an organisational occupation: something that existed as an in-company role rather than as a wider community of practice. Some PMs hinted at a more acute form of this localism only recognising the occupation as something that is internally constructed by the company. The following statement was typical of this type of PM.

'We do have a PM council internally but other than that I don't attach myself to anything else.'

Program Manager, RadarCo.

This association purely with the in-company PM community itself indicates a strong local orientation as this PM sees the occupation as company-bounded: if the company does not provide anything there is no intention to look outside for larger referent groups.

This evidence highlights two identifiable discourses in play; the cosmopolitan, prioritising the external in the form of the profession over the internal in the form of the immediate work place; second, the local, prioritising organisational community, knowledge and priorities over external. However, further analysis indicated situations where these contrasting discourses were reconciled in practice, where it was claimed that it was only possible to deliver on local commitments through learning from extra-organisational experience, through professional events or through changing employers. So, for example, further investigation into career progression revealed that all three companies had, over the last few years, adopted a career structure that was reflective of the APM occupational structure and two companies had gone as far as having their career structure accredited by the APM (see Paton et al, 2011, for details).

'Well, it's been made quite clear, for career progression it's quite important to have (APM membership/accreditation). I was told from the start.'

Project Engineer, MarineCo.

The consequence of this interpenetration of corporate and professional agendas was a position both promoted by the employer and adopted by some project managers which implicitly combines the local with the cosmopolitan – the decision to participate in external, professional communities in order to comply with the *local* demands of the employer which emphasise the importance of affiliation with the professional body as a route to organisational career progression.

Collectively, a great diversity of positions were articulated in this regard, manifesting itself in terms of their relationship with technical workers and with the employing organisation itself.

Knowledge and skills.

Moving beyond the more general discourses around professional or company affiliation, the key differentiator between the cosmopolitan and local views tended to be the discourses around professional knowledge and skills.

Some project managers were adamant their professional skills and knowledge are universal.

'Yes, absolutely transferable, it's all about the principles of project management and the soft skills we've talked about and you can apply those anywhere. I've moved from the automotive industry to the aerospace industry, to the defence industry, I'm using very similar skills all the way through there.'

Project Manager, DefenceCo.

Interestingly this is a view that seems to have gained a considerable degree of corporate support as another senior PM noted in relation to the recruitment policy of his company;

'We've stopped just recruiting project managers from people with technical qualifications and we now recruit graduates into the project management graduate training scheme who show talent for project management. So, we've got some people in our scheme with some very strange backgrounds... one of our best project managers has a degree in reproductive biology. It's not natural for a ship builder - but actually she does extremely well.'

Senior Project Manager, MarineCo.

However this cosmopolitan orientation was rejected by other PMs who prioritised their in-company knowledge over their PM skills and this view tended to be explicated in two ways. A substantial minority expressed an emphatic rejection of the notion of project management as a transferrable, and something which can be taught and accredited;

I don't think (project management) is a science. I object hugely to people who think it's a science and what I'm seeing more and more (here) is there are more and more bits of paper needed because project management says you must have all these bits of paper but they actually aren't helping the job at all, it just takes up more and more of my time.

Project Manager, MarineCo.

Unpacking this argument, there were largely two defences of this position. First, many PMs spoke of the importance of their domain knowledge in relation to product or technology;

Because I'm working in a defence and engineering driven company you need that kind of link and you need to know the engineering side of stuff. So, having the engineering background really helps working in an engineering company.

Project Manager, DefenceCo.

Others made it clear that wider experience of the industry and sometimes of their immediate environment such as their in-company network of contacts was the important factor.

So, regardless, of how experienced the project manager was, or how clever, or how much training he'd had, the domain knowledge of the company and the industry sector is important, there's just no going away from that.

Project Manager, MarineCo.

Between these extremes, various interviewees developed a number of positions attempting to combine both of these views, or to develop a cogent middle ground. So for instance, it was argued:

(It's) a technical construction world which we're in, I think you really need some sort of civil engineering in the background so that you know what you're talking about. I think, though, in project management, generally, you could put a project manager into the likes of mental health, running clinics and things like that, or certain areas and it's all basically the same and the setup is the same and the way they go about how you should, where you start and where you finish, sort of thing, and what you're looking at in between. But, I think, answering your question, on this particular job I think you do need... that technical background.

Project Manager, DefenceCo.

Another highlighted that regardless of previous experience PMs could become effective in any industry as long as they had the correct basics in project management and:

...as long as that person coming in is also given some guidance and support about (domain based knowledge such as) the contract framework of the customer and the product knowledge.

Project Manager, MarineCo.

Another PM highlights the transferability of project management skill but offers the caveat that technical aspects of each industry are also important, and thus limits the universalisability of their experience and knowledge:

I think there are a number of skills which I have which are completely transferable. I think, in theory, a project manager can work in any industry, that the basis of project management is the same. However, obviously, there are technical skills which are specific to each industry. So, for example, if I was to leave defence and aerospace to construction, for example, it's highly likely I would either have to take a side step or a slight step down because in terms of knowledge and of that particular industry I wouldn't have the level.

Project Manager, DefenceCo.

In each case, the position adopted reflects both their conception of their own identity as project manager and how they position this with regard to the boundary between the technical specialism and

the broader managerial/professional community to which they affiliate, with implications on how they conceive of and deliver their role. What is striking, then, is the breadth of positions adopted within what is implicitly the same role, and the resultant tensions and conflicts between fellow project managers themselves.

Discussion

As noted above work identity is constructed within “discursive regimes which offer positions, or epistemological spaces, for individuals and groups to occupy” (Clarke et al; 2009: 325), often in a reflexive and creative manner. Emerging from the analysis, we locate two competing discourses which define the project management role, responsibility, knowledge domain and status in distinctively different ways.

One discourse, strongly related to the *cosmopolitan* identity, sees project management as a completely transferable professional system of knowledge and practice, based on a universal and transferable body of knowledge detached from contextual contingencies such as specific technical expertise of product and technology or domain knowledge specific to the employing organisation. The cosmopolitan identity sees local knowledge of industry, product or employing organisation as easily acquired and of marginal importance. Here project managers are free agents; the currency which facilitates transfer between jobs across industries is their transferable professional skills.

Another discourse that is strongly related to the local identity sees project management as fundamentally an extension of a technical (engineering) role, which prioritises extensive knowledge of the product and technology, and domain knowledge of the organisational culture and industry. Here, project management is seen to provide, at best, some simple and relatively straightforward tools and techniques which must be evaluated for relevance and in all likelihood adapted to local organisational context. Due to this reliance on local knowledge the transferability of project management practice is seen as limited. Here project managers are captive; their value only appreciated within the domain of the employing company.

Table 1 – Local and Cosmopolitan Discourses

| | Cosmopolitan Identity | Local Identity |
|--|-----------------------|----------------|
|--|-----------------------|----------------|

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Community Membership External professional context vs internal company context | High commitment to professional group due to value of professional status. | Low commitment to professional group due to priority placed on company and contextual knowledge |
| Role Skills Transferable skill/knowledge vs specific in-company/domain knowledge | High emphasis placed on role skills due to the value they add to transferability | Low emphasis placed on role skills due to value placed on in-company/industry domain knowledge. |
| | High value placed on external training academic qualifications due to their value as an aid to career mobility | Low value placed on external training due to emphasis on in-company process/product training and experience as valued by the company |
| | High tendency towards a strategic orientation in execution of role due to emphasis on career progressions | Low tendency towards a strategic orientation; tendency to become engaged in the detail of the task. |

Table 1 illustrates the key features of these identities. Both positions involve processes of dis-identification as well as identification, which reflect and reveal tensions between these two discursive positions. The cosmopolitan discourse sees local knowledge as easily acquired, of marginal importance and, in extreme cases, as detrimental as ‘localist’ project managers who ‘cannot see the bigger picture’ are ‘dragged-into-the-details’, adding little more than the other technical specialists on the team. This bears some resemblance to previous work such as Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) where the technical role serves as an ‘anti-identity’ which aspiring managers must vehemently reject in order to reinvent themselves as a project manager – with strong resonances with the Carroll and Levy’s “technical identity that plays anti-identity to a pro or desired identity of leadership.” (2008: 81). At the same time, clearly, similar processes of dis-identification can be found within the localist discourse, which typically dismisses, or at least queries, the practical relevance of abstract knowledge and formal training. Here membership of wider communities of practice is seen as at best an irrelevant distraction which any serious project manager would be too busy to waste time with, or at worst, a reflection of careerism which can almost be construed as disloyalty to the employing company.

Rather than a simple identification of a typology of ‘locals’ and ‘cosmopolitans’, however, the empirical analysis reveals a widely-held liminal position where project managers attempt in different ways to either negotiate the tension between these discourses, or to integrate them in distinctive ways. In every one of the interviews, even in the most extreme ‘localist’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ managers, we found

articulations of both local and cosmopolitan discourses such as defences of local knowledge alongside recognition of the importance of a broader community of practice, or celebrations of the importance of detached strategic thinking alongside dismissals of a notion of project management profession.

On further analysis it becomes apparent that this 'first' liminal position, locating project managers between the profession and the employing organisation, is co-created with the 'second' liminal position. This second liminal position characterises the space where project managers exist in the transition between the careers of technical specialist and management professional. Local project managers who find it difficult to let go of their previous technical role and fail to fully embrace the new managerial role find this failure exacerbated by the need to return often to their technical expertise and community of relationships to help them discharge their managerial responsibilities.

This may be seen as a normal transitional process; as individuals 'unlearn' their technical specialist role and acquire a new managerial role, one would expect to see both the dis-identification of aspects of prior identity and identification with new values in the process of self-reinvention. In a minority of cases, this process of reinvention is evident in the accounts provided, such as the PM who describes the new confidence offered by a project management qualification enabling him to act with authority when dealing with project specialists outside of his technical domain. However, the fact that all project managers, regardless of length of service or seniority, deployed to different degrees *both local and* cosmopolitan discourses challenges the argument that this discursive liminality can be explained as a transitional state. While transition between careers, and in this case up the managerial ladder, would usually indicate a state of temporary transition this case of project management indicates a longer-term state where the managerial role relies on the previous technical role in a much more permanent way.

Tracing these discourses of localism and cosmopolitanism reveals how subjects continually "manoeuvre in relation to discourses, accepting, blending and subverting them." (Brown and Lewis, 2011, 874). The notion of hybrid or meta-identities (Gotsi et al, 2010; Bain, 2005) has been proposed as a means by which individuals and groups attempt to reconcile conflicting demands, combining "mutually antagonistic resources in the authoring of the self" (Beech et al, 2012: 41) - such as the need to be both creative and commercial or both professional and managerial. Here, we find subjects combining discursive logics and eliding differences between local and cosmopolitan rationales, as in the case of the managers joining the professional body to comply with pressure applied by their employer, or the caveats attached to the transferability of project management knowledge as in the case of the manager interviewed who argues that their project management knowledge would readily translate to other sectors, but rejects the possibility that project managers from other sectors could

adapt to his own job. In the process of blending discourses, we do not see such individuals as escaping identity regulation, revelling in the liberation offered by their liminal position. Rather, we understand the project managers in question as “reflexive appropriators of organizational discourses” (Brown and Lewis, 2011, 886), struggling to establish a coherent and valued self-identity in relation to these conflicting discourses.

Conclusion

The last thirty years have witnessed the advent of a more explicit professionalisation within the field of project management. In practice, this has resulted in a striking conflict for contemporary project managers, caught between the localist discourses of the ‘organization man’ (Whyte, 1957), loyal to employer and entrenched in the context of their work and employer, and cosmopolitan discourses of the supra-local professional (Kanter, 1995), mobile, detached and bestowed with transferable, global knowledge. In this paper we have explored the consequences of this tension, taking a sample group of project managers to determine through discourse analysis how they make sense of the complexities inherent in their work identity. In doing so, this research develops the concept of liminality (Turner, 1969; Garsten, 1999), and also notions of localism and cosmopolitanism (Gouldner, 1957, 1958; Kanter, 1995) to understand the impact of these countervailing pressures on individuals as they make sense of conflicting affiliations and roles.

The empirical analysis reveals clearly discernible discursive positions, but also points to the complex combination of such positions in the accounts of the interviewees. The project managers interviewed do not position themselves as *either* local *or* *cosmopolitan*, but instead predominantly position themselves as *both* local *and* *cosmopolitan*. This is achieved in different ways - in several cases we see attempts to combine or even hybridise these discourses. The interviews themselves represented a creative encounter, whereby interviewees attempted to articulate at some length a coherent self-identity, drawing together contradictory discursive positions emerging from their multiple engagements with different communities – technical workers and senior management, organisational colleagues and extra-organisational fellow professionals. We can read into these accounts the debates, confrontations, antipathies and affinities of daily working life.

Rather than reflecting a transient state in an ongoing process of transition, then, this combination and hybridisation of discursive positions reflects the project manager’s need to maintain this liminal position, caught between employer and profession. This is then further exacerbated as they also occupy a translational, cipher role between their prior position as technical specialist and their newer position as (project) manager. Project managers are therefore simultaneously occupying the space

between the institutions of profession and employing organisation, on one hand, and the space between the occupations of technical specialist and manager on the other.

In the first case the liminal position is more persistent or enduring; as the occupation of project management expands and further professionalises, more project managers will be drawn in to this liminal space. At the same time, the growing 'corporate capture' of professional associations may reduce the contradictions experienced here, as the independence offered by the professional body is mitigated over time by its efforts to conform to the agendas of corporate members as employers (Paton et al, 2013). In the second, the liminal position may well be more transitory as individuals relinquish technical specialist roles and identities over time in their managerial role. However this rate of transition is also slowed within companies where project managers are allowed or indeed encouraged to remain specialists – hence for some of our most experienced and oldest project managers, the liminal position had been perpetuated throughout their career and for some it approached a state of permanence.

As an exploratory case study of a single professional group this research is limited by scale and scope and as such raises a number of avenues for future research of which there are two that are of particular interest. Firstly, it would be important to carry out similar case studies of other emerging corporate professions to look for similarities and differences in practitioners' construction of cosmopolitan and local identities. Such comparative work would both illuminate how professional bodies and corporations create tension for individuals existing in this liminal space and understand how these individuals deal with this duality. And secondly, it would be useful to undertake additional research within the profession of project management to investigate in more detail the liminal state as individuals make the transition from previous occupations into project management.

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