EXPLORING THE WORK PRACTICES OF SITE MANAGERS AS PROCESSES OF EMBODIMENT

Rikard Sandberg[1], Christine Räisänen[2], Martin Löwstedt[3] and Ani Raiden[4]

[1][2] & [3] Division of Construction Management, The Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Chalmers University of Technology, SE- 412 96 Gothenburg, Sweden

[4] Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU, UK

In construction, site managerial work has often been depicted as 'muddling through', skilfully solving problems as these inevitably crop up and trying to be everywhere at the same time. This perspective seems to give precedence to structural conditions in the industry when explaining micro-level practice on construction sites. Recently, however, organisation scholars have highlighted a need to investigate managerial practices as these unfold in everyday work. This means we ought to take into account the actual work activities that influence expectations, meanings and values about what is desirable and necessarily relate to everyday work. The purpose of this paper is to further explore how practice enactment and outcomes are embedded in the lived, everyday work activities of real human beings working on site. The focus is on the work stories of two site managers, a man and a woman, in a large Swedish construction company. Drawing on their stories we take a critical stance towards the established view that certain structural and cultural conditions are strong and sufficient precursors to predict work practice outcomes. We propose instead that practices enacted on site can better be understood as various processes of embodiment.

Keywords: managerial work, "muddling through", site managers, embodiment

INTRODUCTION

In a recent study Styhre (2012) depicted the work of site managers in construction as 'muddling through'; they skilfully solve problems as these arise and they try to be everywhere at the same time. Building sites have often been described as chaotic and complex (Cicmil and Marshall 2005; Ness 2010) and the 'muddling through' is Styhre´s conceptualization of a certain set of practices that are *required* by the site managers in order to cope with all the unanticipated problems unfolding in the realms of these site specific circumstances (Styhre 2012:139). Styhre also relates these circumstances to the overall characteristics of the construction industry and furthermore suggests that "a pattern similar to that of construction industry site management may also be observed in other industries that use complex project organisation as the principal organisation form" (*ibid*. 131).

At the heart of this reasoning is the notion that the practices enacted by managers on site can be causally derived from the structural affordances and constraints embedded in the site milieu. This can furthermore be seen as reflecting a general trend in construction research of providing macro-level characteristics interpretative

[1] rikard.sandberg@chalmers.se

precedence when explaining how the managerial work practices at the micro-level are shaped and can be understood (e.g. Dubois and Gadde 2002; Mäki and Kerosuo 2015, Dossick and Neff, 2011). There are however studies that contrast these conceptions. Löwstedt (2015), for example, draws on experience from doing an ethnographic study on a building site to argue that the practices enacted on the site cannot only be explained by contextual circumstances, but are also deeply embedded in personal dispositions and traits influenced by prior preconceptions, background, gender, and competitive spirit, among others. This personal story then points at a much more complex unfolding of site practices and is implying the need for further exploration.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the work of site managers and how it is enacted in regard to structural, cultural and practical conditions in the construction industry. Drawing on practice-based perspectives inspired by Tengblad (2012) and Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003; 2012) we explore how practice enactment and outcomes are embedded in the lived, everyday work activities of individuals working on site. Here, we focus on the work stories of two managers, a man and a woman, and examine their accounts of their day-to-day managerial practices and how they cope with their work. Our findings show that some of the most well-established structural (e.g. "loose coupling") and cultural (e.g. masculinity and paternalism) conditions indeed provides an institutional frame for managerial work situations on site. However, the stories also reveal that outcomes of work practices are not derived from macro-conditions *per se*, but are enacted in and through individual 'sexed' bodies producing meaning to the macro-conditions. This leads us to question the validity of the examined macro-conditions as isolated precursors to predict behaviours on a micro-level in the industry. Our study shows that a deeper understanding of *embodiment* in construction is essential in order to understand how micro-practices are enacted, as well as how macro-practices are embraced, resisted and altered.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Organisation scholars have highlighted a need to investigate managerial work in organisations so as to take into account the work activities that influence workers' expectations, meanings and values about what is desirable and necessarily related to everyday work (Sveningsson et al., 2012). For instance, Tengblad (2012) advocates a practice-based approach to the study of managerial work and leadership so as to include the complexity, heterogeneousness, uncertainty and unpredictability of organisational work places. Using this approach, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have suggested the need to re-think the work of managers and take into account the 'mundane', i.e. small acts that managers carry out every day such as listening and chatting, and which are often trivialised. In the leadership literature, however, much of the research has concentrated on upper-level managers and leaders. Recently, management researchers have started to bridge this gap, and in construction management, studies of lower-middle managers mundane work situations have increased (e.g. Mäki and Kerosuo, 2015; Styhre, 2006; 2011; 2012, Sandberg et al., 2016).

Earlier research on site managerial work in construction

Much research on managerial work in construction, however, takes the macro-level as a starting point and emphasizes the significance of structural conditions in the industry in shaping managerial work practices on micro-level (e.g. Djebarni, 1996; Mustapha and Naoum, 1998, Styhre, 2012; Mäki and Kerosuo, 2015). Here, many build on Dubois and Gadde (2002) and argue that the industry is characterized by loose

informal couplings between actors in the permanent industry network and those of the temporary organisations. In the individual construction projects, however, the various loosely coupled actors involved have to ensure that production activities are tightly coupled according to planned schedules and processes. These conditions call for a decentralization of authority and decision-making to the individual projects. The hub that shoulders these responsibilities and ensures communication, coordination and orchestration of all the interfaces is the site manager, who then needs to be attuned to the different cultures, processes and tools of the different interacting professions in the project (Dossick and Neff, 2010; Styhre, 2012; Mäki and Kerosuo; 2015). In this sense the site manager is pulled between rigorous planning for operations to run smoothly and solving a stream of unforeseen problems continuously arising in the project (Styhre, 2012).

Apart from the influence of structural conditions in explaining the managerial work practice, it is also argued that a gendered belief system plays a significant role. Styhre (2011) argues that a masculine ideology, e.g. a system of masculine beliefs, norms, assumptions and worldview, is rooted in construction practices and behaviours. For instance, it is suggested that masculine virtues of autonomy and self-sufficiency and a proclivity towards rough and heavy physical work is inherent in the mindset of the industry (Applebaum, 1999; Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2014). According to Styhre (2012), these conditions together with conditions emanating from the loosely coupled structure in the industry give rise to the reactive 'muddling through' response mentioned in the introduction. Here, it is suggested that site managers perceive their work as a skilful art of improvisational decision-making and problem solving with the overarching goal to continue production no matter what the circumstances. In accordance with this behaviour, it is argued that site managers develop a paternal role characterized by omnipresence and a 'crisis management' approach. In turn, these behaviours can be linked to a view of overwork as virtue, or as Styhre summarizes it "trying to be everywhere at the same time" and shouldering responsibility for all the processes and outcomes in the project.

In this paper, we apply a critical lens on the assumption that structural (loose coupling) and cultural (masculinity/paternalism) conditions are strong and sufficient precursors to predict work practice outcomes of site managers in the construction industry. We do this by building on practice-based perspectives inspired by Tengblad (2012) and Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003; 2012) to explore how practice enactment and outcomes are embedded in the lived, everyday work activities of the individual managers working on site. This perspective acknowledges prior research emphasising that construction inherently is a "site specific project-based activity" (Cox and Thompson, 1997 cited in Dubois and Gadde, 2002). By taking this "site" perspective seriously, an approach that considers the recursive relationship between micro- and macro practices is applied in the paper.

METHOD

The data draws on in-depth life story interviews with two site managers in a large Swedish construction company. The interviews were part of a pilot study including data from 7 site managers and 1 production manager in Western Sweden. The purpose of the study was to investigate what it entails to be a middle manager in the construction industry. The selections of the two specific life stories were purposive since we wanted to contrast different approaches to, and experiences of, lived everyday managerial practices in construction. The managers, a male and a female,

were selected because they had different backgrounds in the industry and represented what we perceived as two contrasting work practices. The female manager had worked long in the industry and had many years' experience of working on site. She had no prior academic education. The male manager had only worked a few years in the industry. He started in a managerial position and had his experience in the line organisation.

The respondents were ensured anonymity in that all specificities enabling identification would be neutralised, and we offered them the possibility of reading transcripts if they so wished. The interviews were informal, taking the form of casual conversations lasting more than 60 minutes each. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The location for the interview was at the respondent's office on location. A brief interview guide was used to keep interviewer intervention at minimum.

The respondents were asked to provide the essential bio-data concerning career trajectories. After these preliminaries, they were encouraged to talk freely about their work and work role. Our prompts were open-ended; we wanted them to tell us about their workdays, how they generally went about planning and managing site activities, what issues arose and how they dealt with them. 'Free' storytelling has been suggested as an appropriate interview technique for the purpose we had in mind where interviewees' personal stories are allowed to evolve, and in which their underlying assumptions and beliefs guide the conversation (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). (Note: this study forms a part of a much larger, ongoing study in which the same methodological approach is used).

A narrative approach was used to analyse the transcripts of the interviews. Narratives have long been viewed as fundamental forms of human understanding and sense-making, through that individuals structure and organise their experiences of the world (Polkinhorne, 1995). Drawing on Polkinhorne (1995) and Lindebaum and Cassell (2012), narrative analysis was applied on the data in order to identify and code the various fragments that made up the narratives. These fragments were then sorted under themes that linked to the overall common plot concerning how the narrators experienced their work practices.

FINDINGS

Two core themes emerged as central to the project managers' narratives of their workdays: (i) how they experienced their day-to-day work activities and (ii) different approaches of enactment of micro-practices at work

Experience of their everyday work activities

Manager A
Manager A depicted his work as highly demanding with multiple expectations on his role, both by others and on himself. He spent much of his time on planning and administration and felt that he did not have sufficient time to go out and be a support on-site managers, a task that he felt was expected of him. In this sense, he described a situation where he was "stuck in the office" and pulled between administrative tasks and that of being a support and collaborative problem-solver on site. Furthermore, he was managing several projects at the same time. This strained situation in turn created

feelings of insufficiency, fragmentation and a need to be in several locations simultaneously.

> 1.I guess one of the main purposes of my role is to be out in the projects and be a support for production… But this is the thing I work least with. I simply do not have any time to go out in the projects... If they want my support, I tell them that they have to call me.

In addition, manager A experienced that he had limited abilities to influence his work tasks and work load. This is something he sees as a demotivating factor, and which at periods creates an unsustainable work situation. The cause for this, according to him, is a lack of sensitivity and responsiveness from the organisation.

> 2.When I asked for help I got the response: "you have to prioritise yourself what projects you see as most important". This is something I feel I cannot do, because then we will have site managers without jobs in a few months.

Manager B

In terms of workload, Manager B depicted a similar experience as manager A. She worked excessively long hours and felt a strong tension between expectations on project planning and managing budgets on one hand, and supporting site managers in their daily work on the other.

> 3.For a person wishing to be a present manager on site, this is a constant headache!

Manager B recounted a highly demanding work situation where she, during longish periods, practically worked "non-stop". She admitted this was exhausting, leaving her no time to devote to her family and private life. However, compared with manager A, her perceptions of autonomy and motivation at work were very different. She felt that she had a lot of freedom to influence her work in directions that she perceived meaningful and satisfying. This in turn increased her feelings of commitment toward her work, and was a strong source of meaning in her life.

> 4.As long as I can work with what I want in the way I want, I enjoy working here. Today I am definitely in such a position. There are tasks that I am not interested in and there is no way that I am going to perform these.

Her autonomy was manifested in that she refuted certain work tasks that she did not perceive as interesting, rewarding and/or important. Instead she oriented herself toward a role that she perceived better matched her competencies. This role could be described as flexible and flowing in that she adapted her work tasks and activities according to circumstances in different projects. This, however, was always executed according to her own interpretations and decisions, not from top-down decisions. In this sense, she experienced that her own authority and responsibility was loosely coupled from the main organisation.

Approaches to micro-enactment of work practices

In relation to how the two managers perceived their work, they also developed different work strategies and practices.

Manager A

Manager A developed a work practice that was characterised by reactiveness and ad-hoc solutions. A recurrent theme in his story was a lack of control over his work situation. He conveyed an image of structural limitations, and being stuck in a stream of activities that he had scant abilities and possibilities to influence. In a sense, his approach resonates with Styhre's concept of 'muddling through'. He coped with his work by taking on a reactive approach and "fighting fires" when they had already

arisen. For instance, he had established a practice of taking "shortcuts", i.e. to minimise paperwork in order to meet the many contrasting demands that he experienced were demanded of him. This experience ties back to the increased bureaucracy and administration imposed on site managers in the projects.

> 5.We have a business system and decision structures we are meant to follow but there is no time for that. I have to take many shortcuts in order to get my workweek anywhere near 40 hours a week… But if there was to be an internal audit I would have to fill in the papers afterward so I don't get my fingers smacked.

> 6.It is better that everyone has a job and that we deliver money rather than to fill in the right papers. Higher managers understand this.

Feeling locked into a structure where he could just about cope with the demands had a negative impact on him. He experienced high levels of stress and had been close to burnout on several occasions. He also recurrently thought about resigning.

> 7.The previous year was chaotic. Then I was on the verge of quitting my job … I couldn't cope. In principle I worked my 9 hours every day and then I also often worked [at home] from 8 pm until 12 pm many days a week … several weekends as well to get it to work. I was close to burnout then.

Overall, manager A sees increased support, personnel and resources as a key to improve his work situation. However, he is rather pessimistic regarding the prospects of this being fulfilled.

Manager B
In contrast, manager B had developed a work practice characterised by proactiveness and agency. Her story conveyed an image of being partly independent of structural limitations in the organisation and instead influencing her environment in different directions. Although she experienced this approach as highly demanding due to the time and energy it took to deploy a proactive management approach, she also saw the results of this as rewarding. This indicated that she was "on top of things" and could steer the projects, as well as her own work situation in directions that she perceived as efficient.

As manager B saw it, the common view of being a site manager is portrayed as having a highly demanding work role with a tremendous amount of responsibilities. However, she emphasised the significance of the role as a hub in the industry and that it provides power and the ability to wield influence.

> 8.As a site manager, you are personally responsible for the work environment and the personnel. New personnel taking our site-manager courses get really frightened when they see how many responsibilities they will have … but they don't see how much they can influence.

Manager B acknowledges that her seniority has contributed to her autonomy. Her managers have given her freer reins since she often delivers good results. Also, she says that "knowing the rules of the game is necessary in order to know what buttons to push in order to get things to happen". Here, she was convinced that her many years of working on site have contributed to her understanding of the industry and the culture.

> 9.When you have worked in the industry for such a long time as I have, you have learnt to play the game.

However, she does not see her experience and seniority as the major cause. When asked why she can shape her role so freely, she ascribed it to the fact that she is a woman.

10.   I often feel that I have an advantage in being a woman … yes really! Because there are so few women in the industry men are scared to step on your toes. I have learnt to benefit from this in order to get my ideas through and form my role the way I want.

We don't think it is an overstatement to say that her statement is interesting, especially in light of a common view of women as de-preferred in leading position in construction. Manager A stated that personnel and managers in construction usually were not accustomed to "competent women with authority" in this position. Over the years, she has learnt how to use this aspect to strengthen her legitimacy and impose her decisions. This, she said, was the major reason why she could shape her role so freely.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In several ways the data support the image of a construction manager as someone who is 'muddling through', especially perceived the concerning tension of managing relationships between actors in industrial networks (project management activities) and being involved in site-managerial activities. Furthermore, the reactive management approach deployed by manager A strongly resonates with the view of construction middle managers as ad-hoc problem solvers. Here, however, we want to emphasise the difference between loose coupling as a precondition for 'muddling through', and 'muddling through' as a *potential* coping response for how site managers *enact* their perceptions and interpretations of the preconditions.

This distinction indicates that practice outcomes are contingent of how individuals enact different realities on site. This process becomes evident in how manager B talks about her work. While 'muddling through' is depicted as a reactive coping strategy, her coping response rather consisted of actively shaping work activities and the work role. Manager B did not perceive herself as being caught in a stream of activities that she could only just cope with; rather, she saw herself as being on top of things and shaping her context. This perspective considers the role of human agency and that the myriad of practices developed on site also have the capacity to inform macro-practices. In this perspective, lived realities on the construction site become elevated from the shadows of structure and loose coupling to a central scene where practices are established in the industry. This leads us to question if it is fruitful to preferentially perceive managerial work practice in an industry as a result of structural conditions (the loose coupling) in that industry (i.e. an externally independent force that shapes micro-conditions) and consequently neglect how broader sets of conditions, such as culture, ideology, institutions and practises, arise and becomes reproduced in the messiness of 'mundane' day-to-day situations of people working on site. We suggest this position warrants further empirical research of work practices at the micro level.

The goal of this paper, however, was not only to establish a chicken-egg problematisation of the nature of the construction industry, but also to contribute with knowledge on how we can better understand varieties of practices, their enactments and outcomes in regard to conditions in the industry. What causes managers to develop different practices in their work? Here, it is important to explore relationships between potential dimensions that have the capacity to influence practices, for example at the interfaces between managerial levels. Thus, we in part agree with Styhre's (2011) discussion of masculine ideology and paternalism as a source of practice outcomes. In the case of the managers in our data, we could interpret paternalism as being a potential reason for managers A and B's developing separate

work practices. However, the background and experiences of the managers provide further clues. Manager A had only worked a few years in the industry, and started in a managerial position directly after his university studies. A had no experience of working with manual labour on site and can hardly be described as fostered in the 'paternalistic' tradition characterising roles and labour on construction sites. Manager B, however, has a long experience in the industry, and had worked both on site and in the line organisation. Many of B's accounts about work and management evoked what we interpreted as stereotypical images of paternalism, e.g. being autonomous and self-sufficient, upholding a virtue of overwork and carrying the burden of feeling responsible for all processes and results in the project (Applebaum, 1999; Styhre, 2011). In this sense, manager B's work orientation and behaviours can be understood as having been fostered in the masculine and paternal culture on site. However, based on these data, we also find indications that paternalism and 'muddling through' are not necessarily two sides of the same coin. For instance, although manager B has been fostered in a paternal context on site, she does not seem to have developed a reactive and ad-hoc oriented attitude and behaviour as suggested in the concept of 'muddling through'. This leads us to query whether paternalism could also generate engagement and proactiveness among site managers rather than reactive 'muddling through' patterns?

A significant concern in our data that seems to have an impact on practice outcomes relates to unexplored gender dimensions in construction research. Although Styhre (2011; 2012) explores and problematizes managerial work in relation to gender and masculinity, his perspective miss important aspects in terms of the embodied and 'sexed' nature of work and management. This relates to what Collinson and Hearn (1994) describe as a neglect of "naming men as men", i.e. the fact that men are often central to organisational analysis yet remain taken for granted, hidden and unexamined. This is a condition that emerged in our comparison. Our data suggest that practice outcomes seem to be influenced by expectations on the site manager's role as inherently embodied and occupied by a man. This shines through in manager B's account of how her enactment of paternalism seems to take on another meaning when performed by a woman. She felt that it gave her legitimacy and power, and she was able to influence her work in a significant manner. This process suggests that paternalism *per se* might not necessarily be an isolated gender predictor of work practices, but is as much influenced by the concrete, living and 'sexed' person filling the position.

If the concept of paternalism connotes a protective father who in turn asks for loyalty and obedience from the family members, how come that a woman filling the position of the "father" feel that she has an advantage in comparison to many men filling the same position? This notion might at first glance contradict the common view of women as generally disadvantaged in construction. However, following Connells' (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, we find indications that this is not necessarily the case. Suggesting that certain types of masculinity are elevated in working life and serves to uphold male-dominance and gender-segregation in organisations, Connell suggests that living up to the images of these traits serves as source of power and legitimacy. Here, it should be emphasised that hegemonic masculinity does not equal hegemony of all men. For instance, women who take on masculine traits and behaviours can gain more power and legitimacy than many men who do not live up to the hegemonic masculine ideal (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). However, by doing this the women confirm the hegemonic structure and contribute to

reproduce the ideals that segregate women in the industry. Or, alternatively, could it be that men take for granted the advantage of the paternal position? No matter what the verdict may be, we believe our findings warrant further empirical research and discussion.

These findings altogether highlight a need to further explore the embodied 'nature' of the industry, the work of site managers and the construction site at the intersection of micro and macro practices. Or more specifically, we need to examine how organizational elements (structures, cultures, processes and practices) becomes embodied and reified through the biographies and social identities of the people working in the industry. This is a direction that we hope to explore in the future.

REFERENCES

Applebaum, H A (1999) *Construction Workers*. Westport, USA: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Alvesson, M and Sveningsson, S (2003) Managers doing leadership: the extra-ordinarization of the mundane. *Human Relations*, 56(12), 1423-1459.

Cicmil, S and Marshall, D (2002) Insights into collaboration at the project level: Complexity, social interaction and procurement mechanisms. *Building Research and Information*, **33**(6), 523-535.

Collinson, D and Hearn, J (1996) *Men as managers, managers as men: Critical perspectives on men, masculinities and managements.* London: Sage Publications.

Connell, R W (2005) *Masculinities*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Cox, A and Thompson, I (1997) 'Fit for purpose' contractual relations: Determining a theoretical framework for construction projects. *European Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management*, **3**(3), 127-35.

Djebarni, R (1996) Impact of stress on site management effectiveness. *Construction Management and Economics*, **14**(4), 281–93.

Dossick, C and Neff, G (2011) Messy talk and clean technology: Communication, problem-solving and collaboration using Building Information Modelling. *Journal of Engineering Project Organization*, **1**(2), 83-93.

Dubois, A and Gadde, L E (2002) The construction industry as a loosely coupled system: Implications for productivity and innovation *Construction Management and Economics*, **20**(7), 621-631.

Lindebaum, D and Cassell, C (2012) A contradiction in terms? Making sense of emotional intelligence in a construction management environment, *British Journal of Management*, **23**(1), 65-79.

Löwstedt, M and Räisänen, C (2014) Social identity in construction: Enactments and outcomes. *Construction Management and Economics*, **32**(11), 1093-1105.

Löwstedt, M (2015) 'Taking my glasses of in order to see': Exploring practice on a building site using self-reflexive ethnography. *Construction Management and Economics*, **33**(5-6), 404-414.

Mustapha, F and Naoum, S (1998) Factors influencing the effectiveness of construction site managers. *International Journal of Project Management,* **16**(1) 1-8.

Mäki, T and Kerosuo, H (2015) Site managers' daily work and the uses of building information modelling in construction site management. *Construction Management and Economics*, **34**(3), 1093-1105.

Ness, K (2010) Bringing order to chaos: The management of construction projects. In *The 5th Making Projects Critical Workshop, 20-22 January 2010, Bristol Business School.*

Polkinhorne, D (1995) Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, **8**(1), 5-23.

Sandberg, R, Raiden, A and Räisänen, C (2016) Workaholics on site! Sustainability of site managers' work situations? Forthcoming in *CIB World Building Congress, May 30-June 3 2016, Tampere, Finland.*

Styhre, A and Josephson, P-E (2006) The bureaucratization of the project manager function: The case of the construction industry. *International Journal of Project Management*, **24**(3) 271-276.

Styhre, A (2011) The overworked site manager: Gendered ideologies in the construction industry. *Construction Management and Economics*, **29**(9), 943-955.

Styhre, A (2012) Leadership as Muddling Through: Site Managers in the Construction industry. In Tengblad, S (Ed.) *The Work of Managers: Towards a Practice Theory of Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 131-145.

Sveningsson, S, Alvehus, J and Alvesson, M (2012) Managerial leadership: Identities, processes, and interactions. *In*: S Tengblad (Ed.) *The Work of Managers: Towards a Practice Theory of Management.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 69-86.

Tengblad, S (Ed.) (2012) *The Work of Managers: Towards a Practice Theory of Management* Oxford: Oxford University Press.