

## Struggling to ‘fit in’: On belonging and the ethics of sharing in project teams\*

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### abstract

This paper explores the links between belonging and ethics, which remain largely underdeveloped in project studies and are overlooked in everyday practice of managing projects. It focuses on belonging as the process articulating identity-construction of an inter-organisational project team from a global management consulting firm that was working in IS design. As the team’s experienced ‘sense of place’, belonging becomes the space which highlights preferred affiliations and exposes how – individually and collectively – ethics are played out in the context of the management of projects. Four *in situ* belonging-narratives (of opposition, pragmatism, reflexivity, and the habitual narrative) represent ethics as part of lived action and of a life-world that emerge from deconstructing and reconstructing ‘the team’ and an ideal worker in projects. The team’s struggles to ‘fit in’ were experienced both when resisting and when collaborating with the dominant collective narrative of belonging. Modes of belonging are constituted in the relationship between self, others, and ‘otherness’, creating a situated ethical imagination of how to ‘be professional’. Implications concern the politics of belonging and call for a renewed practical ethics that engages with the social nature of ‘being’, to change the current view of professional identities in projects.

### Introduction

This paper argues that the exploration of the fundamental ‘emplacement’ of belonging (Malpas, 2001; Casey, 1993) is underdeveloped in research on projects and that understanding its articulation can open up new possibilities for ethics in project work. Belonging here can be understood as the ongoing ‘sense of place’ (Sarup, 1996: 1) that a project team experienced or the particular ways to participate in the collective process of engaging in the project. Philosophers have long acknowledged the importance of place for identity and belonging. Heidegger views place as the *topos* of Being (1971) while for Merleau-Ponty (1962) both human experience and thought are embodied and linked to an immediate and concrete environment. In Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* (1969) the attachment to place, or *topophilia*, lays the grounds for the exploration of selves through the places we inhabit.

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This text links the question of ontology with that of ethics by taking a deconstructive take at what appears to be simple: the notion that a project team forms a community or a 'we' that knows how to proceed in context, living its 'being' according to the prevailing view of how it 'should be'. Yet today's project teams are mainly exposed to the rationalist approach of project management, which promotes the systematic standardisation of its practice as a coherent body of knowledge (Hodgson 2004; Cimcil and Hodgson, 2004; 2006) and is largely devoid of any understanding of its complex interrelationships with belonging and identity. Still, it is assumed that the latter are important for the very existence of a project team: cooperation. A long tradition of group identity studies, such as social identity theory (Brown, 2000; Tajfel and Turner, 1979), organisational identity (e.g. Dutton et al., 1994), and self-categorisation theory (e.g. Turner et al., 1987), describe the processes by which group identity is formed and the effects on action and cooperation. They share the view that cooperation can be fostered by identifying with the group. However, these approaches stress a dichotomous view of belonging or not-belonging (*to* the team), thereby neglecting the many ways in which social selves are performed in group situations. They also do not attempt to deepen the issue that cooperation cannot be separated from the necessity of solidarity in groups and of them from their networks of relations.

The departure point taken here is that belonging always is ontologically a 'belonging together' (Mason, 2000) or a 'being with' which needs to be interrogated (Nancy, 1991). This is not a traditional view of belonging as portrayed for project teams. The questioning of that social bond undoes any naïve idea of a 'we' in project teams. It rather becomes the relentless examination of its taken-for-grantedness. It is thus that an 'ethics of sharing' can be conceptualised. We share with the other 'an originary and ontological sociality' (Nancy, 1991: 28) because a 'finite being always presents itself "together", hence severally' (ibid.). Thinking in terms of '[b]eing-in-common' rather than 'common being' (Nancy, 1991: xxxix) gets rid, on the one side, of any idea of individualism and, on the other, of any totality of the social space. It allows for grasping that could be potential shared grounds for belonging and for cooperation in project work, which nowadays is mainly sustained by inter-organisational teams in a complex web of project relations. It also raises the question of the actual possibility of solidarity linked to collective action in a space of emergent difference. Notwithstanding that such endeavours may not itself be political for a project team (while contributing to make cooperation viable), it allows for examining shared experiences in projects and the moral horizon of living together. The aim here is to not separate the ontological and the ethical, and to not exclude a view of its political potential. Looking at a project team's sense of belonging gives us an excellent opportunity to make sense of these three registers together.

The project team's narratives of belonging here tell us of 'what it means to be situated in particular places... the various ways people attached and attach themselves (affectively) into the world' (Grossberg, 1996: 185-6). These are inextricably tied to how individual team members construct self-understandings, identifications, and imagine their own social space in terms of what is considered 'proper', 'right' or 'wrong' in managing projects. From this perspective, belonging (*to* the team) is not a given. It is seen as possibility which may or may not be actualised. The social world where team activities take place and the team's social selves are inseparable emergent

processes. However, the paper posits that the experience of 'togetherness' is in itself not enough to account for belonging and requires a narrative performance to be sustained, but also rejected and reconfigured. It highlights the personal experience of a project team's joint action, and the performance of different desires and identifications about how to live and work together – the shared space of 'being' shaped by social practice, difference, and lived action (Lefebvre, 1991). It also stresses the importance of conceiving of belonging and its links to ethics beyond the view of subjectivity, to incorporate the notions of responsibility and community. Looking at the actual modes of belonging can help us to understand what has been called the 'sharing of being', which is critical to our notions of freedom and autonomy (Nancy, 1993: 70-71) – and thus, of ethics. This can support an alternative view of professional identities and their sustainability in project work.

### **Belonging, narrative identity, and the performative nature of 'being together'**

As a process of becoming, belonging is part of identity construction, rather than identity (Hall, 1990; Sarup, 1996). It is always relational, uncertain, and incomplete (Hall, 1990; 1996). In the process of identity construction narrative is constitutive, not just a medium for the expression of a selfhood which lies somewhere 'inside'. 'A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though it is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going... the ongoing story about the self' (Giddens, 1991: 54). Narratives are thus 'interpretative devices, through which people represent themselves, both to themselves and to others...' (Lawler, 2002: 242). As such, we can speak of a narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1991: 32; Polkinghorne, 1991; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002) which demands a certain structure to lend coherence to our sense of belonging. Narrative also marks the boundaries of what is included or excluded from the process, and can serve to legitimise action and personal experience (De Certeau, 1984). In this paper I take the view that the narratives 'do not reveal an essential self as much as a preferred one, selected from the multiplicity of selves' (Kohler-Riessman, 2003: 8). Even if there are limits to how selves can be intentionally placed because of unconscious processes, we can approach narratives performatively, shifting attention from the content of the story to the actual 'story work' (Gabriel, 2000), that is, how the telling of it takes place (Mishler, 1995). Performativity of identity also means that the 'production of chosen identities takes place through a series of performances, or occasions in which identity processes are played out' (Hetherington, 1998: 19). In this study those 'occasions' are found in the personal narratives of belonging, alongside the co-authoring of the main shared story of project experience.

Yet the concept of performativity itself carries some theoretical foundations beyond a mere local narrative construction of identity – a key point for the interpretation of our team's senses of belonging. The predominance of the normative function of discourse in identity construction has been significantly conceptualised by Judith Butler (1990; 1993), who emphasises that identity emerges from the 'repetition' of discursive practices (Butler, 1990: 140). The 'citational' (1993: 2) nature of those practices repeats collective norms that both constitute the group and make its presence felt in the common space. Applied to project work, the performativity of practices refers to current

commonly accepted wisdom about what constitutes professional knowledge and conduct in projects. This shapes subjectivities and identity, reinforced by the view of 'project management' as an aspiring or emergent profession (Hodgson, 2005). An over-reliance on the role of discourse in creating and shaping identities has been criticised for its lack of attention to agency (Herzig, 2004: 133; Nelson, 1999: 322). The focus also refers to individual subjectivity. Even Chantal Mouffe's take on collective identity maintains this emphasis. Her concept of self and identity is described, rather similarly to Butler's, as an 'an ensemble of subject positions, constructed within specific discourses...' (Mouffe, 1992: 237).

This paper acknowledges the profound impact of discourse but does not subscribe to views that cast belonging and identities mainly as its product. Instead, lived experience, individual motivations and personal expectations are seen as having 'equal dignity' for the performance of team modes of belonging. Our ways to belong are embodied in affect and emotion; they are placed in a particular time and space. Belonging does not just mean 'being' but also 'longing' for acceptance (Bell, 1999: 1). In this study, it is built on the basis of enacted team practice, how the team imagines its own work and life, and what it could become. This is consistent with a post-structuralist view of an emergent social space that always is practiced and imagined (Lefebvre, 1991) and emphasises the challenges of understanding ethics as that which we may come to have 'together' or how we are 'us' (Nancy, 2000) as an effect of the 'ontological sharing' (Nancy, 1993: 70-71).

## **Telling the background story: Scene and the actors**

The present analysis of team members' performance of belonging focuses on four individual narratives and is drawn from a wider ethnographic case study of inter-organisational IS development project team. That research explored project work in terms of narratives of knowledge practice with the team as focal actor; later it also critically engaged with project ontology from a spatial perspective (Nocker, 2004; 2006). It was based on different data-gathering techniques (observation of team meetings, writing field notes, interviewing, collecting documents) and focused on the reconstruction on the main team journey. To explore team action and experience, in the wider study I specifically concentrated my data collection around the weekly team meetings; however, I also participated in other meetings (for example, user workshops). In this paper the focus will no longer be shared team action, but how individuals use different discursive strategies in positioning themselves and others, exposing their sense of belonging to the team. The main emphasis is thus on individual narrative construction of social selves and the value attached to it in its various nuances.

The initial project team consisted of eight Blooming management consultants and a representative of the recruitment agency Dill (all names fictitious). Blooming consultants were part of the information and communication technology services of a global management consulting firm with over 30 subsidiary geographical practices and around 150 offices throughout the world – a Big 5 management consulting firm in the UK. The client representative in the team was a senior regional manager, not a management consultant, and was seconded to the project team full-time because of her

longstanding experience in the company and her knowledge of specific business process and the intended users of the system. The team's mandate was to work on a front office information systems design project for the client 'Dill UK', one of the UK's leading secretarial recruitment agencies.

Of the initial project team not all remained in the team until the project ended. Some left at different stages or continued working on an *ad hoc* basis in the areas of technical and functional design, infrastructure supply, and in the set up of the network in the recruitment agency's branches. These membership dynamics affected me as a researcher, too. While I could observe team meetings for a certain time, when the project was put to a halt rather abruptly due to the take-over of the project sponsor, group observation was no longer possible. I had to start chasing team members individually and using every opportunity to talk with them to 'fill in the gaps' about what was happening. This was also the time when the emotions about personal experience of the team became heightened, and so issues of belonging or non-belonging surfaced more explicitly. Four team members can thus be seen as the 'core team' because they have shared experience over the whole duration of the project. They became the main narrators of the stories presented. They are three management consultants (Mark, the business designer; Charles, the project manager; and Kelly, the change management consultant) while one is the client representative (Julie, who also held the roles of joint project manager and business designer). Figure 1 shows how they were embedded as a team in the overall project organisation (original project document). Kelly's role was factored under 'project support' although she was a permanent member of the team.

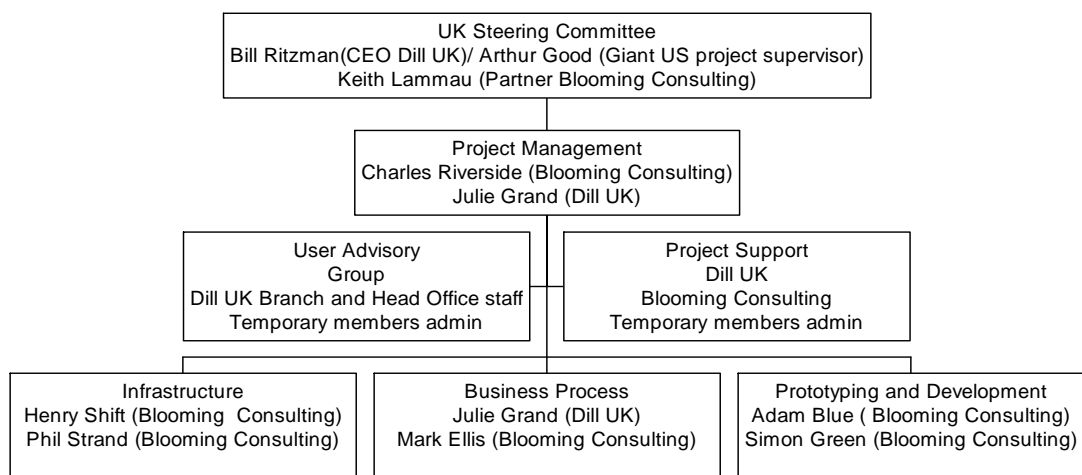


Figure 1: Project organisation. Shows support and supervisory group for the project team.

Regarding the client, established in the 1980s, Dill UK expanded into fifty-five branches across the country, employing up to 500 people. It supplies temporary and permanent staff to UK-business companies. Dill UK was a subsidiary of 'Giant US' – the project sponsor – one of the world's leading global recruitment corporations with a

presence in the USA and Europe. Within the UK, Giant US did not carry its own name but was branded autonomously as Dill UK. During the research period, the larger 'Ride US' corporation took over the project sponsor Giant US and this takeover soon brought the UK project to a halt.

The reasons for the project set up were Dill UK's operating procedures. These were not standardised between company branches and there was no electronic network in place. Data on clients and applicants for temporary and permanent jobs was processed manually and a great deal of business was done through informal communication between recruiters and applicants. The initial business case provided the scope for the design, prototyping, and development of a front office system and the rollout of networked computers to Dill's recruitment branches. It was planned that design and prototyping would extend over six months, after which the system should be implemented (coinciding with the start of a new project/phase).

For initiating the project, the project team had to consider the potential modification and implementation of 'O2K' – a software application already being used overseas by Giant's US recruitment business. Blooming consultants believed that the application was a reasonable functional fit with the Dill's business requirements, though they still needed to confirm its feasibility and make the necessary changes to the source code to meet Dill's requirements. The main team story describes how O2K became an object of contention and continuous negotiations between the project team and its 'counter-parts' at the sponsor's headquarters in the USA. Mainly, the US team of consultants executives refused to cooperate and give away the software code for the application to be implemented in the UK. Gaining knowledge of the code was only partially successful for the team. While it was creating various tactics and expanding crucial networks and alliances to face resistance and proceed, only two months into the project, the sponsor Giant US was taken over by Ride US – a leading global recruitment corporation. This came as a complete surprise to the project team and initiated a time of unprecedented uncertainty in the project. Several signs of decay reflected that the project was coming to a halt although, for a while, the team retained hope of being able to continue the project. Project activities were drastically reduced and soon the team was only completing tasks. The narratives here re-present a complex space of lived action in terms of belonging. Such polyphonic narratives (Boje, 2001) express the individual storytellers' construction of certain team qualities, expectations and desires experienced or envisaged for project management and collaboration (e.g. competence needed, communication, trust, etc.).

I have performed a two-way narrative analysis to look at discursive strategies in the positioning of self and others in the team. The first way was to analyse interviews as a whole unit of discourse, using Riessman's (1993) textual analysis of poetic structures. As Riessman points out, this has the advantage of no longer having to identify a plot in the text. It was thus possible to include open-endedness and the ambiguity of positioning self and others in the team. Procedurally, I have divided interview transcripts into parts, scenes, and stanzas. I have certainly structured the flow of narratives, but followed the textual movements of the storytellers. Their statements and positioning remain temporally-bound, showing how positioning is accomplished scene by scene with reference to particular issues that underlie belonging. What becomes

salient in terms of a practiced 'ethics of sharing' (or the lack thereof) emerged more distinctively with the second way of analysing text through the storytellers' use of poetic tropes. These refer to the 'attribution of motive; attribution of causal connection; of responsibility; namely blame and credit; of unity; of fixed qualities, especially opposition; attribution of emotion' (Gabriel, 2000: 36). It is in this way that values and morality of 'being together' are espoused to oneself and each other.

In approaching the belonging-narratives as a 'performative struggle over the meanings of experience' (Langellier, 2001: 3), we can see how personal identities are constantly constructed and produced out of the relationship with an audience. This audience included me as a researcher, too. The narrators tried to make me 'join their story', take sides, or exclude me; I reacted to and shaped moments of communication, thus participating in the construction of narratives. An illustration of this will become salient, for instance, in Mark's narrative. When speaking about particular topics or circumstances and people: 'fluid positioning, not fixed roles, is used by people to cope with the situations they find themselves in (Harré and Langehove, 1999: 17). Table 1 shows the performance of different senses of belonging. Each narrative expresses main tropes that bestow the overall 'tone' to what is told and how. Team members might position themselves or the team as victims or heroes; they might describe themselves as active or passive, thus shifting positions, both deliberately and unwittingly. For instance, Julie's main image of a 'proper team' and how it should work depends on her repeated attribution of responsibility to others (poetic trope characterising ethical stances). However, she is ambivalent in positioning herself; while she hopes to gain more respect from others, she partly empathises with them. Thus she constructs a narrative of opposition. Julie lives between different self-narratives even if she 'colours' her positioning mainly through blaming the team of consultants. Mark defines his sense of place by adherence to professional practice in rigid terms, Kelly mediates and crosses borders of practice while Charles shows how professional affiliation is made the leading agent of his narrative.

Table 1: Storytellers' images, poetic tropes, positioning of self, and emergent narratives of belonging.

<i>Storyteller</i>	<i>Main image (of 'a proper' team and project management</i>	<i>Main poetic tropes expressed (ethical stance)</i>	<i>Positioning of self</i>	<i>Emergent self- narratives of belonging</i>
Julie	'Running to stand still'	Attribution of responsibility	Ambivalence	Opposition
Mark	'No downside'	Attribution of unity	Denial	Habitual
Charles	'Motivate yourself'	Attribution of agency	Rationality	Pragmatism
Kelly	'Somebody more on the ground'	Attribution of emotion	Relatedness	Reflexivity

## Senses of place: Performing the narratives

### *'Running to standstill'*

Julie's sense of belonging is constructed mainly as a narrative of constraint and conflict. The primary text strategy used is one of opposition but it is not a fixed pattern throughout the text. Julie spoke at length about her difficulties and the emotions she was experiencing in the project. Her blaming attitude sets the tone for the whole narrative in which she portrays herself as 'victim' of unsupportive consultants in the team.

My main priority, as I recall, was the fact that the team was not communicating with me; they were going off and having meetings, making decisions that affected the business but they weren't letting me know. I didn't know what meetings they were having or any conclusions; they weren't writing them down, so that was my main point of the meeting.

Julie blames Blooming consultants for her difficulties in learning project methodology and points out their unwillingness to communicate with her. She proceeds in her narrative with an externally-oriented view of the team. The others are to be blamed and should also 'restore' collaboration with her. However, after a while, she turns the narrative 'inwardly' to tell of her anxiety about where 'to fit in'.

My role is supposed to be the project leader but I'm not ultimately making the decisions. I should be involved. I'm still unclear to where I fit in. My role at the moment is learning what's going on; I feel like I'm running to stand still. They – the Blooming team – have a procedure. If they do something, if they produce a report, they put it onto the PC. I only became literate three weeks ago, so I'm not up to speed with that.

If the team 'owns' procedures, Julie is not stepping back from attempts at revenge and counteracts by strengthening her own procedural requirements towards consultants.

I expect them to keep me informed. I think the more now, probably I'm becoming more annoying because now I understand more processes. So I'm making them put more procedures in place, which for one is necessary but two, is also irritating for them because they don't want to be giving me information or stopping and having to explain things all the time because they, in their mind, know what they're doing.

Julie is also ambivalent. She 'forgives' the consultants' behaviour while blaming them.

I think some people's nature is like that. They are less keen of being questioned on the decisions that they've made but then, they have time constraints and they're paid. But actually no, I'm not really that much sympathetic to it. Their job is to make sure that I understand...

For Julie the team is distant and unsupportive. She does not feel part of it and positions it as incapable to meet her learning needs, to construct open communication and a fair level of partnership. She does not view such behaviour as temporary – one that would improve and 'develop' – but rather as an unchangeable fact.

### *'No downside'*

Mark's narrative competes with Julie's. This will become apparent in the different tone of the text. The storyteller tries to maintain a 'factual' language and a positive view of the team. He remains 'silent' about Julie's outburst in a meeting that both of them



attended. My interview took place right after that meeting when – rather to the surprise of the rest of the team – Julie voiced her frustration about the state of collaboration for the first time. The reinforcing of teamwork procedures made salient differences in team members' expertise and working cultures. Julie was ambivalent over the use of common procedures: she felt it 'widened the knowledge gap' between herself and the consultants.

Mark explains that the meeting has to be considered a routine meeting, downplaying the emotionally charged episode that I just had 'witnessed'. The narrative starts with a view of his role responsibilities.

I thought the meeting went well. I mean it was just a progress meeting, it wasn't a key meeting. I was taking over responsibilities that I've been carrying since the start of the project but I was never really intended to carry.

Mark had also sponsored the addition to the team of the change management consultant from Blooming's to support the client employees' transition to the new information system.

Kelly... I've been very keen to get Kelly involved because she is a change leadership specialist, so she will be dealing with how we communicate to the users and the people external to the project. I thought I was very, very happy with the meeting today. I'm very happy; it was very positive.

This positive emphasis shows Mark's satisfaction with the team situation and the newcomers. At the same time, the text shows that he 'softened' the negative episode with Julie and persisted in his assumption that there would not be any problem of collaboration.

I don't think there was any problem at all or anything particularly different from the dynamics. I know there was Julie getting more confident. She is more happy to take a hand up and say: 'Look guys, I need this!' rather than wondering if she is going to ask a stupid question. She knows the business better than we do and she's worked here for 13 years; she raises some issues that we won't see. So I think in terms of the dynamics, there is no downside.

At the end of Mark's narrative, 'there is no downside' in terms of perceived effects of Julie's behaviour for teamwork. His view is based on a single discursive strategy of 'communicative risk-avoidance'. Mark denied having problems working with Julie, and the rest of the team was presented implicitly in a positive manner. Mark tells a normalising (yet not normative) narrative trying to impose to the audience how the narrative should be read. In his view, the team would be making progress and 'grow together'.

#### *'Motivate yourself!'*

This narrative tells us about the need to cope with changing project requirements, making compromises, and deciding on trade-offs in uncertain environments. Overall, the team is depicted positively. Substantial differentiations, however, are made based on the storyteller's view of individual capacity for self-motivation at work. Based on this criterion, Charles categorises actors as either in or out of the group of motivated team members.

Within a team things that went well... Well, I think we had some strong performance on the team. I felt, there are people in Blooming's who try to positively seek out to work on engagements. I found people that positively want to work.. Mark Ellis did an excellent job. Kelly is pretty much in that category as well. It took a while for Kelly and myself to understand each other and I think we know each others' strengths.

Charles oscillates between a rationalist and a pragmatist approach. Whereas the former is underpinned by a moral stance exemplified in the text by a repetition of 'shoulds', the latter makes constant reference to a context that did not allow a proper team contribution to emerge.

Phil [infrastructure specialist] would always do what was required of him but he was very rarely taking initiatives. As a manager you're used to manage the job; Mark Ellis was more to management. Mark was very strong. I think Phil needs some guidance for building his motivation and commitment. He didn't enjoy the experience at all but that shouldn't impact on duly honest performance. If we only perform well when we're enjoying ourselves then we are not making any consultancy. Or, at least, you have to find enjoyment in difficult situations; you have to meet the challenges; you have to motivate yourself even when the client is difficult.

On this view, aspects such as 'liking' the activity one is engaged in are framed in such a way that they become the criterion that can distinguish good and bad performance. Charles uses pragmatism and denial to justify himself. He also perceives himself as a victim of the client's behaviour. Although showing some hesitancy in attributing blame, Charles' suspension of judgement is not maintained throughout the narrative.

We started well with quite a tight team and with a clear plan. It first went to the rye a little bit when it became clear that 02K was not the right product and the whole plan suddenly didn't make sense. So we probably all got frustrated about the fact that decisions weren't made and progress couldn't be made, but that sounds like I'm blaming the client for everything and I'm not sure. I'm largely, but we could have made more progress. That was frustrating.

Charles perceives himself as 'entitled to leave the ground' of day-to-day project management without having to question his own conduct. He is aware of some of the implications for the team.

We should have started Mark clearly is the senior guy who is going to run it whereas Julie in particular wouldn't except Mark in that role. It was perfectly appropriate for Mark Ellis to sit and run things there but not in her eyes. I've should have paid more attention to Julie.

Charles is thus able to 'manoeuvre around' issues of role responsibility with different tactics: blaming, rewarding, and distancing himself. Responsibility becomes almost exclusively a matter of developing personal motivation to engage in the project. Some tension around the storyteller's own management style is quickly 'resolved' within the narrative, to give closure to personal experience.

Do more myself and trust less the team way. But having said that, until now I haven't had problems like I had at Giant US, and I happen to allow the team a lot of attitude because these are very bright, highly paid people. They should be capable of managing their time. So I tended to be fairly hands off and got more involved since. I'm this way. More focused on role structures but, again, that is a bit of a reaction to the situation.

Hence, Charles does not end with a narrative of transformation. He does not really envisage the need to change either his leadership or his management style. His moral

judgement supports the value of behavioural rationality in the context of high uncertainty where facilitating the team's sense of togetherness and sharing would not be among the core responsibilities of a highly-paid project manager.

*'Somebody more on the ground'*

Kelly was the senior change management specialist in the team. In the view of this storyteller, consultants' assumptions of professional practice are hindering more than facilitating teaming as an inter-organisational process. The narrative reveals the qualities and criteria that are imagined as fundamental for supporting collaboration and for gaining more influence when working with stakeholders. Kelly makes clear how ambivalent behaviours might be triggered due to the experienced pressure in the project. She thus constructs the team as in need of her support.

And what did Julie say? She upset Mark. I didn't take it quite as extremely but she made a comment about the functional specification that wasn't to use. Mark took it very personally. Julie was saying 'this is rubbish' and wasn't showing him any respect. She felt Charles wasn't spending enough time there, so there was all this sort of underlying tension and I suppose, at that meeting, I felt she tried to get some sort of clarity on what the next steps would be.

Julie was not seen to understand the 'rules of the game'. Yet Kelly continues to justify Julie in the light of the project's uncertainty.

I sat down with Julie; she didn't really understand, so to talk about business rules: She got quite upset in that meeting and felt the whole project was getting a little bit out of hand and that people weren't being supportive, so we sort of seemed to, and I was quite surprised at that! But we seemed to have got to a point where she felt a little bit at risk because of this merger.

Kelly positions Julie simultaneously as a 'victim' and as a 'perpetrator' in the extremely volatile situation. Julie would be manipulating the team to fulfil her own expectations.

Julie felt exposed generally... but in her way was starting to begin to think 'Right, I point the finger at a few people and say they haven't worked very well.'

Kelly's is constructing her self-narrative as mediator. This voluntary role-taking is not acknowledged by Julie. This pushes Kelly to become explicit about her idea of team effectiveness. She so moves away decisively from being a mediator later in her narrative.

I don't find Julie's approach very structured; so what I was trying to do was to put some structure around. To say 'Let's just, let's not emotion carry us away here. What is it that you are missing?'

Julie is constructed in the guise of a child which imitates others. The imitation is preordained: it must be Blooming's way of managing projects. Kelly had indeed tried to replace Charles who was not there most of the time.

It was an assumption that she would grasp all these things and people. To a certain extent I could agree with that. I introduced to her the idea that may be in going forward we'd need a slightly different project structure where you would have somebody on the ground more constantly than Charles.

Kelly does not perform a pessimistic narrative. She breaks from the conventional idea of having a 'common team goal', and emphasises the importance of making sense together about developing actual opportunities to shape the collective process.

You might say 'Ok, you've got what we want to achieve and each of us individually will work out the how but we will share that in an understanding' and sort out if our measures will be constructive. So, for me, that's saying a common output, but a shared understanding of it, and an opportunity to shape how it gets done in the group.

Yet sharing perceptions might not necessarily bring about a better cooperation. Team members may not be empowered to take decisions.

The biggest missing for me is that we didn't have an opportunity to discuss it, so there actually wasn't a leader. Mark would take a lead and he would agree that you needed common goals and objectives but not feel empowered to have that sort of conversation. He would be looking for that to come out from somewhere else. So he was tactically trying to adjust what he saw and I'd say that would be more his deliverables: the seeing the need for a bigger goal.

Kelly positions the team as fragmented. This fragmentation has its root in the lack of conversations about the common space of experience. She describes team members as unable to incorporate personal interests and goals into wider team goals. Kelly remains critical of enacted professional practice. The team is not seen as just a victim of the situation; it is described as having been incapable of moving up to the collective level of sharing. The storyteller's construction of team life and belonging supports a more relational understanding of social selves. Kelly remains flexible and imaginative about what 'structure' should look like in a project and for a team.

## The chiaroscuro of belonging

The narrative space of belonging in this paper can be seen as *rhizome* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), which is heterogeneous in nature and can have infinite ramifications (Chia, 1999). We can see different storytellers that have cast themselves as a multiplicity of characters using different strategies and tropes to put forward their identifications and desires, narrating 'polyphonic' tales (Bakhtin, 1965; 1984) of belonging. The team's enacted practices are linked to desires and preferences which emphasise the notion of belonging underpinned by the 'knowledge of the proper' – or what could be called a 'situated imagination' (Stoezler and Yuval-Davies, 2002) about ways to participate in team life and project work. In Julie's narrative, blaming is accompanied by imagining how she could be better supported in order to learn; Mark denies personal feelings and imagines a team unity as 'natural' improvement. In contrast, Charles imagines an autonomous and self-motivated team even if he is not prepared to engage in the process. Finally, Kelly imagines ongoing conversations that were not really taking place. If there is a shared wish to control and master relationships in the team by adhering to habitual practice, at an individual level it is experienced differently: in Mark's case, largely through suppression of emotions and personal expression; in Charles' case, more openly through the idea of being able to 'fix' problems through rational solutions. This 'illusion of omnipotence' comes with a particular view of expertise, which forges a certain knowledge that is 'less and less that of the *desiderable* in any sense and more and more that of the simply *doable*'

(Castoriadis, 1991: 249; original emphases). If narratives are spatial practices that mark boundaries, it is my contention that these two narratives have built frontiers rather than bridges in De Certau's terms. These two narratives promote a life-world in projects where 'vulnerability and pain are magically sidestepped' (Elliott, 2004: 79). Indeed, standards about project management adopted by the professional service consultants in this team have been 'cited', in Butler's terms, and have affected the team's sense of belonging. In this sense, 'one does not simply or ontologically "belong" to the world or any group within it. Belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction' (Bell, 1999: 3). For the project team, those levels refer to oneself, to the others, and to the emergent difference stemming from cited practice which they had to face individually and collectively.

If we consider the other two narratives, the experience and imagination of the team's belonging changes. Julie's narrative of opposition and Kelly's narrative of reflexivity envisage belonging without losing sight of difficulties or of the possibilities to positively redefine the collective space. The two narratives do not account for the same space of belonging either. The predicament of 'reciprocation and recognition' (Gabriel, 2000: 84) where vulnerability and caring are not excluded sign Kelly's view. This narrative gives a rich picture of a more relational and performative understanding of teamwork and project management. Although the team is seen as having been unable to arrive at shared understandings, for the storyteller cooperation *can* be enabled and remains a possible world to pursue in projects. Julie's narrative is mainly characterised by blaming the team as the 'villain', the anger and frustration stemming from perceived unfairness towards her. The main feature of her identity construction as a team member is grounded in that perception of injustice. However, Julie is not only playing the victim; she also claims back a space for herself in the team through her opposition, even if not without ambivalence. This has not been 'a confident voice narrating a simple tale of achievement, success, survival and sacrifice, but it is a voice which allows different constructions of identity to be experimented with, developed, modified, rejected and reconstructed' (Gabriel, 2003: 175). If Julie resists a way of being a project manager that she feels imposed upon her, she nevertheless opens up a space for dialogue in her constant effort to adjust. 'Seeking to belong' (to the experts), Julie embodied a liminal identity space. These kinds of hybrid spaces and the movements in-between (Bhabha, 1990) of lived action tend to be downplayed in current project management approaches, and this was partly salient in the enactments of team members.

The four narratives reveal how dominant project management practice has become an instrument for inclusion/exclusion and for the legitimisation of social practice. This was opposed but, more often, it triggered conspicuous ambivalence regarding personal choices, action, and how to 'fit in'. Yet, in the constant tensions between lived experience, expectations, and imaginations, the team has also been capable of self-reflection, questioning its own assumptions and practices. Storytellers have been able to draw a rich and particularised picture of their personal experience, exposing how they imagined the team to be, as well as how it 'could become' – as alternative or possible worlds to inhabit together.

## Opening up spaces of belonging: In pursuit of an ethics of sharing

The team's narratives expose different forms of belonging through ongoing identifications, dis-identifications, and conspicuous misrecognition. The narratives fundamentally question current notions of a 'common team identity' that are defined by team membership, a unitary view of social selves, and a simplistic notion of knowledge integration. The team's life-world draws on particular experiences and underlying desires that are invoked on the basis of imagined criteria (i.e. qualities or values) for team collaboration and project management. Individual narratives favoured aspects that can be subsumed in qualities emphasising relational awareness, mutuality and respect, and a sense of achievement and worth. The team's narrative performance so became a complex process of positioning oneself and others, and moved beyond either resistance or conformity by emphasising ambivalence, denial, contradiction, and rationalisation.

Different enacted practices have shaped the team's life-world and exposed its ethical imaginations. The latter became 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash' (Sarup, 1996: 25). On the one side, those writings 'adhere to' and on the other, 'break free' from instrumental rationality as conventionally understood in the case of project teams. In this sense, 'if identity is always somehow constrained by imaginative forms, it is also freed by them...we are not necessarily restricted in terms of such cultural imagination of social circumstances' (Frith, 1996: 122). This then has been a narrative performance of a complex social space: if a 'team feeling' was not achieved, individual narrative performance has enlightened us about ways in which belonging was experienced and ideologically conceived. I therefore place my reading of the narratives as 'the desire and capacity of individuals and groups to negotiate new forms of belonging – many of which are disconnected from more familiar attachments to territory, geography, or polity' (Croucher, 2004: 35-36). Crucially, different forms of imagination and desire about how to live together shaped senses of belonging, not fixed criteria or characteristics. Tensions due to ongoing power relations created hybridity that was sustained alongside competing attempts to lend coherence to the individual's identity narrative. The narratives tell us about the struggle to belong (narrative of opposition) as well as its 'taken-for-grantedness' (the habitual narrative); they also tell us about the desire to change forms of belonging. All these ways to belong help to explain what it meant to be a team member in this study, and may indeed apply to the increasing number of project teams that are facing similar situations in today's often volatile project environments.

The team's narratives raise two fundamental questions although my answers can only be tentative and incomplete. One concerns the mode in which we understand belonging; the other is about its links with collective action, and how a new 'ethics of responsibility' could look like to make solidarity possible when there is no shared feeling of belonging. In either case, the implications need to be addressed. Let us look at belonging 'itself' for a moment. Firstly, the narratives (of reflexivity and opposition) point to the relevance of 'the freedom not to belong as the right to withdraw from one's constituted identity in order to form a new one, and the freedom not to be represented' (Melucci and Avritzer, 2000: 507, abstract). This clearly undermines an 'integrationist-view' of belonging. We may therefore benefit from Agamben's radical idea of a

collectivity that can be seen as 'being whose community is mediated not by any condition of belonging... nor by the simple absence of conditions...but by belonging itself' (1993: 85). Following Agamben's reasoning, and trying to 'translate' it in the context of the project, team members would not have to share properties or understandings, nor have a unitary 'team feeling'. If individuals in the team are working and living together, that would be enough to speak of belonging: what 'counts' is the existence of a relationship to the team itself.

Secondly, we need to reconsider the links between belonging, agency, and solidarity. The narratives in this paper shift our attention from the question of identity or 'who we are' to contemplate 'what we are doing together' and 'how we are relating to each other'. Agency is therefore not located solely 'in the team' or in a conceived space of project management practice.

... Agency is the product of diagrams of mobility and placement which define or map the possibilities ... Such places are temporary points of belonging and identification, of orientation and installation, they are always contextually defined. (Grossberg, 1996: 102)

The narratives have pointed at *how* those temporary 'orientations and installations' could look like. An implication may be that attachment is no longer relevant for thinking of belonging; everyone would have to find personal ways to cope with the effects of 'heightened' individualism (see the narrative of pragmatism). On the one hand, this would be consistent with the assumption of a shared identity where solidarity is taken for granted; it would just 'happen' as a by-product of interaction. On the other, it would emphasise an ethics of rule-following inscribed in standardised practice and the spatio-temporal organisation of resources. Solidarity would emerge mainly because of actual 'opportunities for interaction' (Brint, 2001: 19).

Another possibility – the one favoured here – is to revise how an alternative 'citizenship' may be reconstructed in a team. This may perhaps be seen as a more 'tempered radicalism' that can help us in working through ambivalence and change (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) without having to dismiss the possibility of some shared ground for belonging. As this study shows, crucially belonging can exist in narrative construction and thus 'feel real' to participants. So the question is whether belonging takes on a positive or a negative meaning for the actors involved in joint action. The kind of ethics of responsibility evoked here is far removed from the more conventional notion of interaction and group behavioural norms for cooperation, which stress consensus in cognitive terms. The rights and duties and the sense of entitlement always have an affective and embodied dimension; they also require to be negotiated among participants. One would be led to assume that such aspects are best 'captured' by virtue ethics. It would be closer to what Flyvbjerg (2001: 2) described based on Aristotle's virtue of *phronesis* as 'the judgment and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor.' Yet, the narratives in this study invite us to be cautious: social actors as 'virtuosi' may inspire behaviour but this kind of excellence can be difficult to achieve when fragmentation and ambiguity co-exist alongside the 'pull' of inertia of habitual practice. The narratives suggest the need for a refined ethical-aesthetical understanding of knowing how to work in projects (see the narratives of opposition and that of reflexivity). Aesthetic knowledge implies an awareness that is both intuitive and emphatic (Strati, 2000). Attuning to such 'ethics of aesthetics'

highlights how expressions of people are enacted through collective identifications in everyday life (Maffesoli, 1996), calling for more attention towards 'spontaneously responsive relations to others and otherness' (Shotter, 2005: 115) through the local interactions and ways to generate different ways to know, to belong, and live together.

Yet where does this leave us with solidarity? The narratives suggest that solidarity is not possible without some shared understanding of what a practice means in day-to-day interactions. This resonates with a thinking of a project team as a community, which is an ongoing project where the sense of belonging is never to be fully attained. 'Incompletion is its "principle"' (Nancy, 1991: 71). Such ontological primacy of sharing is what creates the very experience of a space of community; it cannot be taken for granted while always being a place of ethics, politics, and responsibility. Unlike virtue ethics, such approach does not propose a particular concept of a 'good life' in project teams. It rather suggests how to create the conditions to make contributions possible within different project arrangements. It is also compatible with holding a multiplicity of values. The narratives point out that some of these will need to be made explicit in the group. In this sense, we cannot just speak about values *per se*, but of the affirmation and recognition that lived values may gain in the shared space of belonging.

The narratives suggest that this will only be possible if we loosen the 'stranglehold' of standardisation that erases spaces of difference and lived experience. This may be achieved with a more critical revision of project management education (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2004). The conceived social space (Lefebvre, 1991) of team action could then be reconstituted. What is at stake is no less than what is suggested also for us researchers in studying organisation – the 'restoration of experience and of corporeality... to acknowledge what was never lost but merely *misplaced*' (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000: 2-3; added emphasis). This paper thus proposes to advance empirically an ethics of belonging and responsibility where identities, values, and modes of dwelling in projects do not appeal to some external criterion imposed upon teams but originate from enacted team experience, ongoing negotiations, and forms of imagination about the possible spaces to inhabit together.

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