



Pull yourselves together, guys! A gendered critique of project managers' ethics in a public sector context

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abstract

Project management is omnipresent, but the growth of project management practices and discourses has suffered – and is still suffering – from a lack of ethical reflection. Moreover, most of the existing literature on project management ethics aims at universality and generalised frameworks. We take a critical stance to such ambitions and draw upon a tradition of thought that relates ethics intrinsically to community practices. We therefore present a rich account of an empirical case, that of the Swedish Road Administration (SRA), where the context –the public sector, the construction industry, the project managers relying on external suppliers – is extremely important in order to understand how ethics is constructed. Drawing on critical perspectives on projects and gender, as well as on feminist ethics, we read the empirical material and show how ethics is constructed in complex and sometimes contradictory and surprising ways. We show how being (or seeming to be) in control becomes a central issue, at the same time as the traditional dichotomy of a masculine ethics versus a feminine ‘ethics of caring’ is problematic as such constructs are fluid and intertwined.

Introduction

From the genesis of contemporary project management, which is often traced back to large military projects in the USA in the 1940s and 50s, project management has spread across many sectors and countries, becoming a legitimate way of organising work in many different situations (Blomquist and Söderholm, 2002). However, the growth of project management practices and discourses continues to suffer from a certain lack of reflection with regards to the ethics of project management. The fields of technology ethics and business ethics have gained importance following the increasing predominance of technology in society and the growing scope of the private sector, respectively, while the same has not occurred in the field of project management. Talk on project management ethics is scarce, even though project management talk is omnipresent. Critical reflection and analysis on how project management ethics is constructed in specific contexts is extremely important because of the increasing influence of project management discourse and practices in a growing number of areas. Moreover, prescriptive and functionalist voices, constructing project management as a general profession, have come to dominate the field. A critical stance is therefore needed in order to bring up an important issue, ethics, and to problematize it without

falling into normativism and universalism. In this paper, we will make an attempt to start filling this lacuna.

Looking at the construction industry in Sweden, the empirical setting of this article, it is striking that the entire industry endures the notoriety of low ethical standards. Therefore, an industry-wide effort to improve the ethical standards was initiated in 2002 (SOU, 2002) – an effort that involved actors from both the public and private sector and resulted in the report ‘Pull yourselves together, guys!’ – ‘*Skärpning gubbar!*’ in Swedish. While there have thus been animated discussions on ethical problems among practitioners, such issues have only been scantily researched.

Most of the existing literature on project management ethics aims at universality and a general framework of project management ethics. The Project Management Institute (PMI), responsible for the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)¹, has a code of conduct which may serve as a starting point for ethical discussions in projects (PMI, 2006). The PMI code is a normative text with no ambition of presenting critical research on project management ethics and it might be quite unfair to subject it to critique from non-practitioners. However, PMI remains to be the institution conveying opinions held by leading practitioners in this rapidly expanding profession (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007). We claim that the universalism underlying this code of conduct does not capture the complexities of project management ethics. On the other hand, there is a stream of literature that builds on the philosophical tradition of applied ethics, where rather simplified takes of different strands of ethical theories (e.g. utilitarian, rights-based, deontological theories) are condensed to a set of tools that might be helpful for understanding the ethical dimension of a project (Helgadóttir, 2007). The critique against this tradition is that such tools are detached from project practices, a critique thus similar to the critique against the universalist ethics expressed through standard documents such as PMI’s PMBOK: understanding ethical practices requires an understanding of context and local circumstances.

To further this line of critique, we will draw on a tradition of thought that relates ethics to community practices. A main source of inspiration is the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, whose series of books has argued against any possibility of giving rational explanations to ethical beliefs outside a community or a tradition (MacIntyre, 1985, 1988, 1990). What is labelled ‘rational’ or ‘ethical’ only makes sense within a particular community with its own tradition. This de-legitimises any attempts to ground an ethics on pure speculative reason or on socially detached rationality – or a veil of ignorance – since all such positions are implausible. MacIntyre is certainly not the only one who advances a theory based on the creation of ethics as part of a social practice. This social construction of ethics (values, ideals, norms) is one of the main components in Critical Theory (Lukács, 1971; Mannheim, 1976) – a component that renders emancipation possible since structures are mouldable.

¹ Several professional and academic associations share an ambition to formulate, maintain and develop a coherent body of knowledge within the project management field. However, when explicitly mentioning the *Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)*, we refer to the standard document and the registered trademark owned and published by the Project Management Institute (PMI) since 1987.

In a male-dominated project-based industry such as the construction sector, the social construction of ethics intersects with the construction of gender. Taking a feminist stance, we are inspired by what can be referred to as the feminist critique of ethics (a quite diversified field, as we note in the next section). In the same vein as MacIntyre, such critique rejects a universal conception of ethics and reclaims legitimacy for an ethics embedded in a context of relations and interactions. Subjects are no longer detached and autonomous; rather, they are interconnected and dependent. To heed the context means that, in the male-dominated construction community, it is hardly rewarding to study ethics without taking gender into account (cf. Greed, 1991). Moreover, in one of the authors' works (Lennerfors, 2008), gender emerged as a very important category when conducting a study on ethics and project management. Another broad source of inspiration is the theoretical tradition of critical management studies, specifically critical project management studies. Within the field, contributions from a feminist stance have been quite rare – as will be discussed in the next section – which makes it even more important to not fall into the trap of gender-blindness.

In line with the thought that ethics is a part of a community, we will try to give a rich account of a case study – hence the relatively large number of pages dedicated to a critical analysis of the empirical material. Such a focus should not be interpreted as an attempt to draw general conclusions from a single case. Rather, we intend to discuss an interesting case in order to problematize a number of issues concerning the construction of ethics and gender. Our aim is to explore the complexity of such constructions by bringing forward what may be considered as discrepancies. We will discuss how femininity and masculinity related to ethics are not the terms of a discrete dichotomy, but rather may be seen as more fluid constructs.

To summarize, this article intends to add to the limited discussion about ethics in project management by taking a gender perspective; we also want to criticize universalistic stances on ethics and, indirectly, on project management, by analysing the importance of the context with reference to an empirical case. But let's not jump to conclusions. We start by sketching the outlines of the theoretical framework for our analysis.

Critical analyses of ethics in project management – a theoretical framework

As pointed out, ethics is rarely acknowledged as a central aspect of project management, and we have yet to see the establishment of a tradition of critical approaches to the analysis of ethics in project management. Other researchers have been engaged in similar questions driven by a critical preoccupation, of course. We can roughly divide such analyses into two streams, namely 1) critical perspectives on project management, in which some adopt a gender perspective and 2) feminist ethics as a critique of traditional ethics. We will briefly discuss these traditions below.

Critical perspectives on project management, 'traditional' and gendered

Critical analyses of project management, inspired by the field of Critical Management Studies, have focused on different aspects, but one of the most discussed issues is how control and discipline are enacted, constructed, and manifested in this 'new' form of work. While project workers are viewed upon as emancipated, creative and autonomous subjects, critical researchers have shown how formal tools and structural arrangements, the professionalization of the project management discipline, and also more subtle informal and individualized mechanisms, have shaped project work practices and project workers' subjectivities (Hodgson, 2002; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006a; Thomas, 2006). Project managers control individuals working in projects, but are also, as professional project managers, self-disciplined. The issue of control and self-disciplination in project work has, therefore, become a central preoccupation in this line of research.

Likewise, mainstream project research tends to view projects as flexible, action-oriented opposites of permanent bureaucracies (cf Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). However, both projects and bureaucracy rely on rationalised and formalised tools and techniques as well as on rules (Hodgson, 2004; Hällgren and Söderholm, 2006), and they both emphasise the objectification of work and strict control (Thomas, 2006). Therefore, while project management might have represented a possible emancipation from the shackles of the iron cage of bureaucracy, project management may indeed seem to be reinforcing the control of individuals.

Most critical project studies have focused on formal control mechanisms within project management and their complex interplay with more cultural or normative forms of discipline and control. Less has been written on the construction of explicit ethical norms to follow and on how these norms are then handled in practice. Even if the step from analysing and taking a critical stance on control to discussing ethics is not that long, it has seldom been taken. There is clearly a need for studies within the critical tradition that focus on how ethics is constructed when working with projects, particularly rich empirical studies.

To further the notion of ethics as constructed in project work settings dominated by masculine norms, we need to take into account the notion of ethics as gendered. Gender plays a significant role, still even critical studies have suffered from gender blindness (Martin, 2003a). From a gender perspective, work, organizations and knowledge about management are no longer considered to be 'neutral'; rather they are sites for producing and reproducing gender and gendered norms (cf. Alvesson and Billing, 1999; Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Kanter, 1993; Wahl et al., 2001). Consequently, gender-informed critical approaches add a new power dimension to traditional critical theory by recognising the presence of a gender order. Hirdman describes this gender order as constituted by two logics (Hirdman, 1988). The first is the separation of the masculine from the feminine and the second the subordination of the feminine to the masculine which is considered the norm. The underlying point is that the gender order is an ongoing construction; therefore it can, and should be, subjected to critical scrutiny (Martin, 2003b).

Critical project researchers have indeed occasionally used gender theory to analyse project management knowledge and practice. Masculinities are predominant in texts such as the PMBOK – the ‘bible’ of project management (Buckle and Thomas, 2003) – but project work has also been shown to reproduce inequalities in practice (Gill, 2002; Styhre et al., 2005) and reaffirm masculinities as control, competition and dedication to work in situations where there was expectations on teamwork opening up for femininities such as cooperation and empathy (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006b). Although these studies focus on different aspects, we can see how working in projects has meant a re-construction of competence as intertwined with the construction of (certain) masculinities. Given these notions on disciplination and gender as central aspects in the analysis of the construction of ethics in project work, we now turn to the underlying issue of feminist ethics as an alternative to (masculine) universal ethics.

Feminist ethics

A feminist critique of ethics is not a homogeneous stream of critique, but rather a multitude of voices that criticise something conceptualised as ‘mainstream’ or ‘traditional’ ethical theory. Carol Gilligan’s critique of the implicit bias towards a detached ethics of universality in Lawrence Kohlberg’s experiments can be seen as paradigmatic in this sense (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981). Gilligan’s work brings up the subordinated role of an ethics of care and a relational ethics that are part of the moral experiences of most women. Even though Gilligan’s work is not intended to be essentialising, it may appear as built on essentialist assumptions when described in a schematic and simplified fashion (Crane and Matten, 2004). In this latter version, men are expected to handle ethics as a universal matter, to which the feminist critique opposes by advocating the alternative ‘ethics of care’. The main point in Gilligan’s work is that theories of ethics are gender-blind and written by/for a community of men only.

The relational theme that is brought up in Gilligan’s work has been developed into several directions. One such interpretation is developed by Noddings, whereby caring is situated in a relationship which is contextualized (Noddings, 1984). One cares for particular individuals, not about mankind as such. This relational type of an ethics of care brings up the need for understanding the context of ethics. Another stream of feminist ethics emphasises the mother-child relation as the foundation of ethics. It is claimed that one party is always more vulnerable, and such an empirical fact should thus be taken into account when developing theories (Ruddick, 1983). The mother-child relationship is here contrasted to the contractual relationship held to be the predominant mode of portraying societal relations. The contractual relationship describes a relation between two equal, independent, rational persons, while the mother-child relationship describes a relationship where one party has (unlimited) power and the other one is vulnerable and dependent (ibid.). Virginia Held, in a way, brings this mother-child relationship to the next level, in expanding its legitimacy from the private realm (at home) to the public realm (Held, 1983). A possible step towards a better and more ethical society could be a re-conceptualisation of human relationships from contractual to care-based also in the public realm. However, there are possible deficiencies with the mother-child relationship, when it comes to the unequal distribution of power, and the possible arbitrariness in the discretion of the mother.

What we find valuable in feminist critiques of ethics is a suspicion against universal accounts of ethics being based on some kind of detached rationality. A main point in feminist critiques of ethics is not only to include the moral experiences of women into theories, but also to emphasise those aspects of ethics which tend to disappear in the (serious) world of men, namely relationships, care, cooperation, consensus, community and dependency. What we end up with is a critique which shares some of MacIntyre's arguments, especially his later work on the importance of dependency (MacIntyre, 1999), but with a specific feminist dimension.

An important point to which we must return is the social construction not only of ethics and project management, but also of gender. In our analysis we will speak of masculinities and femininities which are to be understood as social and cultural constructs shaping the values, experiences and meanings that are culturally interpreted as typical of men respectively women in a given social context (Alvesson and Billing, 1999), or better 'within a system of gender relations that give them meaning as *gendered 'masculine'* (Martin, 2001: 588) or *'feminine'*. As in other dichotomies the masculine/feminine one can be criticized for creating opposites where 'real' men and women move between such constructs. There is also a debate, although quite limited, on the use of dualisms and dichotomies in organization studies, especially in terms of gendered dichotomies (Alvesson and Billing, 1999; Holmquist and Lindgren, 2002), for example the gendered labelling of leadership (Billing and Alvesson, 2000). Knights (1997) analyzes the different approaches to dualisms and their consequences from a theoretical point of view, and how, even trying to undermine gender inequality, researchers end up by reproducing it. Celebrating dualism, for instance, is a way of making 'the other' visible, but it can imply conflict and hierarchy. Keeping in mind this issue, in practice we are still held accountable for what we do as a woman or a man, which means that doing gender may be unavoidable (West and Zimmerman, 1987). How we interpret an action or interaction depends on whether it is done by a woman or man as well as the kind of individual considered appropriate for certain positions are two examples of the (sometimes unconscious) gendered nature of organizations.

To summarize, a critical perspective on project management and on gender, and feminist ethics have elements in common and give our analysis a certain direction. They encourage us to pay attention to the social construction of both ethics and gender – and their mutual relation – to be suspicious of universalistic claims and, therefore, focus on their situated dimension and the importance of the context, and finally to analyse how these notions are constructed and what are the consequences in terms of control and discipline.

Short-circuiting projects and bureaucracy; the case of the SRA – project management in a context

Although projects have traditionally been narrowly defined in industrial terms, the label 'project' is today being applied to an array of widely different situations, both in working and private life, and the notion of project management may thus become an empty signifier. Therefore, even if some characteristics of working in projects may be common to all these endeavours, we do think that the context in which the project is

carried out affects how the practice of working in projects will be constructed. We will therefore describe the context of our study, the Swedish Road Administration (SRA), in some detail. We start from the big picture, the societal context, and turn to the SRA as a context, and end with the local practice of what project managers do at the SRA. First a few words on our method.

Method

The research project started as a study of ethics and project management in the construction industry. Gender emerged as an interesting category and perspective already during field work, although it was in the course of the analysis that we realized the complexity of the issue. Interviews with 31 people working in one of the SRA divisions, mostly project managers, have been carried out by one of the authors (male). Other people interviewed are heads of departments, a head of region, a director-general and employees from technical and legal support units. Of the 27 interviewed project managers, three were women; these figures also reflect the actual ratio of men to women in the total population of project managers. The questions dealt with what project management ethics is at the SRA: e.g., what 'good project management' is, how relations with the contractors should be handled, or how to handle ambiguous situations.

In analysing these interviews, we have taken an interpretative stance inspired by social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). We have treated them not as reports of how project management 'really' is done at the SRA. Rather, we relate to the interviews as accounts of how those people involved in project management construct an image of what good project management is as well as how one manages a project. Gender emerged as a central category partly due to how good project management has been described in terms that, with our theoretical understandings, are interpreted as gendered, and partly due to one of the interviewee's accounts of herself as a gendered project manager. In other words, we consider gender as a contextualized practice and we base our analysis of certain constructions as gendered on, respectively, our own theoretical position, and on 'participants' orientations' as evident in the text (cf. indexing in Sunderland, 2004; cf. also Swann, 2002). We also consider 'numbers' as important in this case: in an organization and an industry that has been and still is male dominated, men are in a privileged position to make sense of complex realities and shape norms for what good project management is, drawing upon masculinities in the industry. We will analyse talk as gendered not in terms of 'language style' (cf. Holmes, 2006), but in terms of what is said, i.e. which traces of the construction of masculinities/femininities we see in these accounts. Our analysis comprises several steps: we have re-read the empirical material several times 'seeing' new patterns as well as contradictions/inconsistencies, and at the same time we have re-read the theoretical contributions that inform our analysis 'seeing' how they helped us in our interpretations. In other words, we take a sceptical interpretive stance, where we try to combine an open attitude to the material with our theoretical understandings (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). The themes we will present can be said to have 'emerged' doing a close reading of these texts and keeping in mind the context for these texts. The quotes found in the article are significant as illustrations of how talk about a certain theme can take form, and are, of course, just a fraction of the empirical material. In the second part of our analysis, we have chosen to focus particularly on quotes from two of

the project managers, one woman, Pettersson, and one man, Axelsson. This does not mean that our entire discussion on gender and ethics relies on these two people, in particular the woman. Gender is present in the talk of the other project managers as well, particularly the men. Still, we found it extremely interesting to focus on them in the last part of our analysis and to juxtapose how they construct ethics because such constructions reveal a complexity that is not acknowledged by usual views on ethics and gender, particularly reductive readings of feminist ethics. By giving place to empirical constructions of ethics that 'disrupt' the theoretical understanding of masculine and feminine ethics, we do hope to enrich the theoretical discussion on ethics and gender. The aim of this is thus to explore, to problematize and to discuss the issue in a certain context and relate it to the theoretical work done. We do not aim at any general conclusion or universal theory, which would be a contradiction to our position. Of course, more empirical work can be done to reach an even deeper understanding of the phenomenon. It would be interesting, for example, to interview more women; something that might present some difficulty in this industry. Let's turn then to the context.

The context of project management ethics

We have argued that the context and community is important to understand not only ethics, but also project management. We hold that the most important factors are that the SRA is a big and important public sector organisation, located in the ethically problematic (and male dominated) construction industry, with no resources for implementing projects within the organization.

Public sector organization

The fact that the SRA is a public sector organisation is stressed by many respondents as the main argument for the need to uphold high ethical standards. The director-general explained in an interview that the entire activity of the SRA has to be based on 'ethical grounds'. He explains that the SRA is 'a public authority, responsible to the government, having to administer a rather significant amount of tax money' and that the SRA has 'to do that in a way that is aligned with the fundamental values that govern society.' Furthermore, SRA is constantly appearing in public media, which reinforces the need for being ethical. Many of the respondents also conceive of the private sector as a place somewhat void of ethics, which creates the necessity to protect the tax payers' money from companies in the private sector. This might be a general judgment on the private sector, but it is even more valid in the construction industry, according to an interviewed regional manager.

Swedish construction industry

The Swedish construction industry has a legacy of haphazard work, petty corruption, and inefficiency. The regional manager of the SRA explained that people and companies are always trying to take short-cuts and the SRA has to safeguard itself against these attempts. Many respondents, for example project manager Mr. Åkesson, states that the SRA is seen 'as a standard for the industry'. The respondents consider themselves as responsible for creating a sound 'tone at the top'. SRA is in fact the biggest Swedish public buyer of construction work with an annual turnover of 6.7

billion Swedish Kronor (around 700 million Euro). With great power, comes great responsibility.

A first obvious measure to raise standards in the construction industry, albeit not initiated by the SRA, was a project involving the whole industry, public buyer and private and public contractors to understand how to break down structures that stifle competition and pricing transparency, to reduce the use of illegal labour, and to strengthen the competence of the buyer. This work resulted in the previously mentioned official government report about the risks and possibilities of the construction industry (SOU, 2002). This industry-wide effort, spanning over public and private sectors, confirms the aforementioned claim that the construction industry has suffered from anti-competitive diseases. It also indicates that the industry is trying to get better and remove the stigma of 'unseriousness'. From the point of view of gender, the title of the report is also interesting: 'Pull yourselves together, guys!', or, for those who know Swedish, 'Skärpnig gubbar!'. It is thus not only the industry which has problems, but these problems are attributed to men. A certain kind of 'old' men. It would not be a generalisation to suggest that the industry in which the SRA is a leading figure is dominated by middle-aged men. Only around 10 percent of the project managers at the SRA (in the division studied) are women (in 2003).

Tax payers' money but no operational resources

The ethically problematic and male dominated private construction industry is nevertheless an industry on which the SRA is dependent. In the wave of deregulation and privatisation of industries in the beginning of the nineties, it was decided that the SRA should focus on being a competent buyer of consulting services and construction work. They should have no internal resources for actually carrying out construction work. It is within this contextual setting that we understand project management, ethics and gender.

Project management ethics in a context

What is project management at the SRA? Project management is certainly a very complex practice with many dimensions. However, if we focus on how tax payers' money is used (the need for ethics in administrating tax payers' money was expressed by the director-general), we find that most of that money goes to suppliers. From this perspective, project management amounts to making the best use of tax payers' money. Therefore, the relationship with suppliers (e.g. consultants and contractors) might be held to constitute a rather central role in project management ethics. There are certainly other ethical issues that may be addressed: environmentalism, state appropriation of private land, accurate information to the public, etc. Nevertheless we have focused on the supplier relation, not only because the relation to supplier is economically significant, but also because of the inherent ethical problems and corruption in the intersection between the public and private sector (Andvig et al., 2000; Rose-Ackerman, 1978), and because of the repeated references to ethical problems in supplier relations during the interviews. The SRA as mentioned before has no resources for implementing projects, which makes them dependent on the suppliers. The supplier relation is where discussions about project blueprints, extra costs and compensation are held, which can

lead to increased costs for the SRA and increased income for the suppliers. Given this contextual description of project management at the SRA, an organisation with intense contact with the private construction industry, what is project management ethics?

Masculine and feminine project management ethics at the SRA

Let us start with some insights from how the project managers conceive professional ethics by asking them how a good project manager handles the relation with suppliers. One recurrent answer is that it is about keeping a straight line from the beginning of the project. You act correctly from the beginning and you do not change your behaviour and mind during the project, no matter what contractors demand or think. In other words, there is a very strong tendency amongst the project managers to talk about fairness as *independence* from contractors.

You should be straightforward straight away, y'know. And then I think that they feel that they want to do business with you; that this is fair; that this is serious. (Åkesson)

The project manager thus has to uphold a strong unchanging character. This is also expressed by project managers at the SRA with the word '*integrity*'. Integrity is 'not to be under anybody's thumb' (Gustavsson) or 'to be economically independent of somebody' (Rickardsson). To maintain integrity is not only an issue related to that of being bought, or corrupted, by a contractor, but is also an issue related to everyday project work. Again, you shouldn't give in to any demands from the contractor. Moreover, you should treat every demand in the same way. As one project manager puts it:

[Ethics is about] acting in a good way. The different contractors should know that it doesn't matter if it is me or anybody else for whether they will get money or not. (Axelsson)

This means that, if a contractor approaches the project manager at the SRA, the project manager should act in a way which is totally *impersonal* and *impartial*. The contractors should know that it does not matter which of the project managers is approached with a demand; the answer should be exactly the same notwithstanding the personal identity of the project manager. To stay independent from the contractors and consultants guarantees the maintenance of impartiality: to 'get involved' can mean 'become partial'.

In these accounts of what it means to be a project manager what may be visible is the strong tendency towards concepts such as *integrity*, *independence*, *impartiality*, and *impersonality*. These very concepts are those unveiled as gendered by feminist critique of traditional organization theory (for example Kanter, 1993; Wahl et al., 2001; Alvesson and Billing, 1999; Collinson and Hearn, 1996). Masculinity constructed as toughness, rationality, independence, impersonality, authority, and control becomes the norm of how work is to be done. As Kanter (1993) puts it, a 'masculine ethic' can be identified as part of the early image of managers. This 'masculine ethic' (or organisational monoculture, Hearn, 1992) elevates the traits assumed to belong to some men as necessities for effective management, one of these traits is for example 'a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interests of task accomplishment' (Kanter, 1993: 22). Independence is also a concept strongly related to

masculinity, for example by conceptualization of how identity is constructed in a masculine culture (as opposed to the interdependence characterising the feminine relational way): 'a self-concept that depends on differentiation and social-emotional separation from others' (Dachler and Hosking, 1995). At the risk of sounding more monolithic than we are, we can see how constructions of masculinity and of ethics are intertwined when project managers speak of good project management.

Another theme emerging from their accounts is the need for being in control. The SRA handles a great amount of tax money which has to be protected from profit maximising private sector suppliers. They speak of dominating the contractor. As one project manager states,

We command and control. [...] We command and control and order. Ha-ha! (Svantesson)

We have already discussed that control is one of the issues critical studies of project management have elicited. We see traces of control becoming self-discipline in our case too. The object of control is the relation with the contractor as well as one's own self in that relation. Control is interrelated with impersonality, impartiality, independence and integrity. Again, we are able to read the need for control through gender lenses and see how control is a fundamental element in the construction of masculinity, for example in 'competitive masculinity', a masculinity construction which implies a 'way of relating to the world wherein everything becomes an object of and for control' (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993: 671), which also demands self-discipline, self-control and self-domination. Indeed, to control social relations and one's own self-image has been held to be part of the identity work that especially men are doing in order to maintain a secure identity at work (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Holgersson, 2003).

This preliminary analysis of project management at SRA suggests that the image of the good project manager corresponds and intersects with the construction of a certain type of masculinity. As in other organizations and contexts, competence and masculinity conflates (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). The gender order is re-constructed by making masculinity the norm and, thus, implicitly femininity as deviation. It then becomes interesting to look at what women say, since so far we have heard only male voices. Do women construct a good project manager in the same way?

One of the three women interviewed discusses the importance of being a woman for her conception of project management ethics.

[A project manager should be] fair. But I think that *as a gal* I might dare to be fairer. I don't have to show that I'm right. I can get back to a meeting and say 'well, we were wrong, you were right'. I don't know if it's easier for me than for a guy to do it, but I hope... well, actually it shouldn't be easier, but I think it might be. (Pettersson, emphasis added)

Pettersson is the only one of the three to discuss gender as an important component in ethics. She also speaks of fairness and describes herself, 'as a gal', as allowed to be more fair than other project managers. *As a gal* compared to *as a project manager*. She doesn't have to 'keep a straight line' like the male project managers. Nor does she have to prove that her actions stem from an unchanging character. She can be wrong, and can

try to correct mistakes, while the male attitude would be to carry on, and on (cf. Greed, 1991 for similar accounts of women in the same industry).

By explicitly referring to her gender as what makes the difference in terms of how she acts as a project manager, Pettersson interprets herself as ‘other’ than the norm, the guys. In a sense, the gender order is reproduced. She also seems to be aware that showing one’s weakness and fallibility is not what project managers do. Her account is therefore concordant with our analysis so far. We see an organization where project management ethics is constructed in masculine terms and where control is considered as a major issue.

Yet Pettersson’s ethics is not only different. In the quote above one might recognise a sense of pride. She considers herself to be really fair, while the men only want to be dominant and right all the time. This conception of ethics, as true fairness, as opposed to male dominance and insistence on being right, may be seen as a potential way of initiating change regarding project management ethics at the SRA (cf. Wahl, 1998). Instead of being right and being dominant, one should be fairer. Pettersson, however, holds that as a woman she can be fairer. This fairness might only be available to women. To sum up, our preliminary reading holds that there is a dominant masculine ethics at the SRA with values such as integrity, independence, impartiality, and control. Pettersson also frames these values as masculine, while at the same time presenting a better alternative – an ethics which takes fairness seriously. From now, we will continue reading the interview with Pettersson, but we will problematize its inherent relation to masculinities and femininities. We will present other empirical material that problematizes the monolithic view that both we, and Pettersson, have had up to now.

Consideration for suppliers: Problematizing masculinities and femininities

The supplier relation is where most of SRA’s money flows, so it is not surprising that a lot of the material in the interview concerns conflicts related to fair compensation. Pettersson holds that male project managers, while realising how a flawed argument had led to the supplier not being paid enough, cannot admit that they were wrong. They have to be in the right. Pettersson, as we have heard, claims to be different.

When I notice that the contractor is actually right and we were wrong, even though we have denied any compensation, then I want to give the contractor that compensation, but the construction management consultant does not agree with me. He thinks that we were so sure before. But I say that it later appeared that we were wrong. Then he says that it is up to the contractor to discover that. But I hope that we will be repaid in some other way in the future and he says: no way. [...] [The other project managers] do not agree, they think that you should keep a straight line. They do it in that way. It’s difficult to admit they were wrong. There, I think there is an advantage of being a gal. (Pettersson)

To be a female project manager in a male-dominated organization means to be more visible and to run the risk of being judged by stereotypical assumptions about women in general (Kanter, 1993). In our case, it could be argued that Pettersson herself has accepted such stereotypical assumptions, explaining her own behaviour as depending on her being a woman, i.e. someone who can show vulnerability and fallibility. When

women enter organizations the question becomes who is going to get precedence in constructing notions of 'women' and 'femininity'. Often it is men that are in positions of being able to do that (Wahl, 1998). In our case, it may be argued that Pettersson is actively constructing herself and stands for her own way of managing projects. Pettersson might thus be seen as what Wahl defines as a power resource (ibid.).

Nevertheless, why should a project manager at the SRA care about the suppliers' profitability? If the suppliers cannot present good arguments for extra compensation themselves, is it not remarkable that Pettersson herself finds the arguments for the suppliers and admits that she was wrong? In accord with our take on the feminist critique of ethics, Pettersson's description of project management ethics could well be in line with an ethics of care. What is remarkable for a feminist critique of ethics is that we have found evidence of an ethics of care even among male project managers at the SRA. They frequently state that the SRA has to understand how the suppliers are not in the business of charity, i.e. suppliers need to make money. The SRA has also to remember that it makes no sense to drive a supplier into bankruptcy (there are already too few actors). So, while our reading of the empirical material up to now has focused on a masculine ethics, another ethics based on consideration for the supplier, alongside the construction of dominance, impersonality, and independence exists. Axelsson, a male project manager, describes how lacunae in the contract might provide the institutionalised setting for being considerate:

Some lacunae in the contract should exist – the possibility for the contractor of getting some extra money. It doesn't have to be wrong. The competition is limited and yet the prices are, due to competition, very low. So somewhere, sometimes, they have to be able to get some extra income. (Axelsson)

Consideration and an ethics of care is part of project managers' account of how to deal with suppliers. Once, Pettersson was approached by a contractor who also wanted to get extra compensation. Listen to her account of the situation;

Once I got a telephone call from a contractor: 'Now I know that I don't have any chance, but we have had so many problems, we are 200.000 SEK minus. I beg you to get this money'. I told him that he couldn't ask for it straight out. And I felt, he only does this because I'm a gal. So I said: 'forget it'. However, I discussed the matter with a representative of a municipality also involved in this project, and he said 'the project was carried out in an exemplary manner, shouldn't they get something for it?'. We checked the contract for lacunae. And we found some lacunae, where the contractors could be entitled to some money. And they got a bit of what they demanded. We said: 'see it as a bonus'. This is the way to do it [i.e. bonuses for exemplary work]. You could also write the contract so that contractors get the incentive for doing a good job and coming up with good ideas. But you have to do that in a formalized way from the beginning. (Pettersson)

Pettersson interprets the indecent proposal as related to her being a woman. Our reading is that it is not the case. More or less tacitly, it is the way relations between project managers and contractors work. Finding lacunae is how you make money. Almost all project managers agree that contractors only make money if there are errors to be found in the contract.

An interesting turn is that Pettersson's argumentation for a different system reflects ideas widely diffused in the management literature giving expression for rationality. Returning to the preceding part, we see that Pettersson has indeed been discussing

fairness, not consideration. We interpret her way of describing how to handle relations with contractors as really the most impersonal, independent, impartial way. If the SRA has made a mistake, she deals with it in a rational and impartial manner by giving the contractor what is due the contractor.

What consequence does this have on our argument? Is the feminine ethics, in the description of Pettersson, indeed an ethics which strictly focuses on impartiality, impersonality, and a commitment for doing exactly ‘the right thing’? Do Pettersson’s ethics relate more to fairness than to consideration (an ethics of care)? Axelsson, on the other hand, does indeed care for the suppliers’ well-being. He stated that one should not drive a contractor into bankruptcy, that the contractors are vulnerable due to intense competition and that they are in need of some extra money once in a while. These insights seem to point to a situation where the feminine and masculine versions of ethics are not so dichotomous. Pettersson, who claims to use a feminine ethics, resembles textbook descriptions of a masculine ethics. Axelsson, a man, is into the business of caring and consideration. Nevertheless, there are some particularities in the accounts that might suggest why Pettersson can be considered different from the other project managers – namely control.

By leaving lacunae in the contract, project managers give contractors something extra. This is the way of caring for contractors. However, we hold that the masculine version of project management is to emphasise that they are still in control. Contractors find the lacunae themselves, present the problems to the project manager, who can do nothing else but accept extra costs. The scenario described by Pettersson, when she first says *no* and then says *yes*, is unacceptable in a masculine project management ethics. The common view is that there is a need to stay in control. By changing her mind, Pettersson deviates from this norm. The main issue is thus not about giving extra compensation to contractors; it is about giving the impression of being in control.

We view a construction of masculinity as paternalism: men exercising power by authority but with benevolence – a protective authority based on cooperation rather than coercion, a wise and self-controlled father that rules in a just way (Collinson and Hearn, 1994: 13). Research in the field of masculinities has long been interested in the fragility and precariousness of strong and authoritative identities (*ibid.*). In order to uphold such identities, men are constantly ‘working’ on that; not losing face is a central element. Here again the need of being in control is important, as well as the need for caring for the other men’s ‘face-keeping’ (Holgersson, 2003). Not crushing a contractor, but working with lacunae may be interpreted in this way too. Both parties keep their faces. Contractors accept being controlled and sign unrealistic contracts, as long as they can show profitable figures at the end of the project (for other cases and interpretations of the issue of contractual arrangements and inter-organizational relationships see for example Clegg et al., 2006 and Green, 2006).

To sum up, our empirical material problematises a strict division between a masculine and feminine ethics. Pettersson is impersonal and sticks to the facts, and she calls this feminine. Axelsson, a man, is caring and shows consideration. What is important is to not lose face and to seem to be in control.

Conclusion and discussion

Ethics is an important component of business and organization studies, often with the hope of finding universal applicable rules or principles to avoid the ‘trap of relativism’. Project management is no exception and, although ethics discussions are still relatively marginal, expectations of creating a general framework for ethics are dominant. Our empirical case takes place in the construction industry, in a public sector bureaucracy, which is held to have ‘historically intense’ relations to masculinity. Work is organized in projects, which also have been argued to reinforce and reify masculinities. Our choice of analysing this case through gender-lenses makes it possible to see what gender-blind studies would have missed.

It is therefore not surprising that ethics is constructed in terms of impersonality, impartiality, independence and integrity. Moreover, respondents work in projects and we suggest that project management discourse might contribute to translating ethics into ‘being in control’ more than might happen in other bureaucracies. Aspects of visibility and accountability in projects might contribute to norm systems even more rigid than the traditional iron cage bureaucracy. These contextual elements lead to a construction of ethics similar to the usual description of a masculine ethics in critical project management theory and feminist ethics writings. The context might also show how such ethics have been constructed: the construction industry has always been – and still is – dominated by men, who might reasonably be given precedence in interpreting reality.

In reaching this neat picture, we realized that there have been many ‘anomalies’ in the empirical material questioning such a monolithic view in the form of narrative themes that existed parallel to the expected masculine discourse. Male project managers have not only emphasized impartiality and independence, but also consideration and care. One female project manager spoke of feminine ethics, but also challenged the other project managers’ ethics by drawing on an ethics of detached rationality, a masculine ethics.

The complexity of how ethics is constructed and practiced in this case clearly shows that it is not possible to discuss ethics in a de-contextualized way. Moreover, femininities and masculinities are fluid and constantly under construction. As earlier mentioned, gendered dichotomies have been discussed within the field of organization studies from a theoretical point of view (cf. Alvesson and Billing, 1999; Holmquist and Lindgren, 2002; Knights, 1997). They are useful but problematic at the same time. Our contribution is to provide an empirical example of how femininities and masculinities become intertwined, even in a context where masculinities would indeed be expected to dominate.

Likewise, the case of the SRA provides a more nuanced description of the issue of control in projects. We see here that control is indeed a central and important issue, but is also a question of gendered disciplining. Men are subjected to discipline as they are expected to show they are in control (in line with what other critical studies have pointed out), but they are not strictly controlled in their actions (they still leave lacunae in contracts). They are expected to construct their own identity in masculine terms, something that can marginalise those who do not follow the same norm.

In conclusion, we do think that our article can contribute to the critique of universalism and normativism that has characterized most of the literature on project management and on ethics. We claim that the context in which project managers' work is of extreme importance and has to be taken into consideration to understand how projects are managed and how ethics takes form, instead of attempting to ground an ethics on socially detached rationality. This is also a methodological consideration: rich empirical studies are needed and we show how such an approach can provide interesting and sometimes surprising insights. Our article provides one example of how ethics in project management is constructed, and it would be interesting to see how this construction takes form in other contexts (for example in other industries or settings) and to compare such studies in order to reach a variety of versions of project management ethics that can give a more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

Most importantly, however, we add to the tradition of feminist organization studies by showing one (more) example of the gendered character of organizations and, in this case, the particular aspect of ethics in project management (even though it comes in unexpected ways). The article also belongs to a tradition of critical studies that highlights the central issue of control and discipline in project management work and identity construction. However, as indicated, control now assumes a gendered character. Moreover, we have discussed that dichotomies between different conceptualisations of ethics are fluid and we have shown instances of an ethics of caring between men, and of men that criticize a woman performing a masculine detached ethics. In this way we have tried to problematize the notions of detached ethics as masculine and an ethics of care as feminine. Future contextualized studies may contribute by going beyond, or, at least, by subjecting gendered dichotomies to critical scrutiny.

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