Cognitive interests, epistemological space and aspirational identity: how does identity form part of construction?

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Abstract

The concept of ‘identity’ has been relatively unexplored within the discipline of construction and questions as to how identity forms part of organisational practice remain novel. Identity is often defined as the distinctive character of any given individual or the specific dispositions shared by members of a social group. More specifically, it refers to a sense of selfhood; it is an expression and a conception of how individuals or groups affiliate and it reflects a sense of being and belonging. Identity presents a set of generating and structuring principles, dispositions and structures of perceptions that guide action and practice. Practitioners will influence, and be influenced by, the nature of actions-interactions and the discursive practices of their organisations. It is argued that the epistemological nature of the space within which practitioner actions-interactions occur is critical in the development of identity. Moreover, the epistemological position(s) that scholars assume is salient in the narration of the socially constructed identities.

In this paper we consider the concept of identity and relate it to construction industry through three key approaches: first, drawing on Jürgen Habermas’ (1972) theory of knowledge and human interests, we consider how individuals’ identities can be characterised by their cognitive interests—technical, practical-hermeneutic and emancipator—and how managers in the construction industry display distinct social behavioural traits akin to their cognitive interest; secondly, we couple the notion of cognitive interests with Martin’s (2002) three cultural perspectives—integration, differentiating and fragmentation—and explore how these may be perceived as three distinct epistemological spaces that represent a robust discursive framework for the study of socially construed identities; and, thirdly, we explore how, through the concept of epistemological spaces, propositions on the ‘aspirational identity’ of practitioners can be constructed. Through this paper, we argue that the concept of identity represents a useful analytical approach for exploring issues related to agency, interaction and discursive practice, and that it can support the study of organisations as socially constructed realities, subsequently stimulating further insights into the social dynamics that form part of, and influence, the practice of construction organisations. The paper also identifies how this framework can be used in future research work on identities in construction.

Keywords: Identity, project organisation, cultural perspective, cognitive orientation
1. Introduction

The theoretical concept of ‘identity’ is relatively new to the field of construction management and questions as to how identity forms part of organisational practice remain unexplored territory (Brown & Puha, 2011). Identity is often defined as the distinctive character of any given individual or the specific dispositions shared by members of a social group. More specifically, it refers to a sense of selfhood; it is an expression and a conception of how individuals or groups affiliate and it reflects a sense of being and belonging. Identity presents a set of generating and structuring principles, dispositions and structures of perceptions that guide action and practice. As such, the concept of identity represents a useful analytical perspective for exploring issues related to agency, interaction and discursive practice, and it can support the study of organisations as socially constructed realities (Ybema et al., 2009).

Identity has been explored in relation to organisational control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Willmott, 1997) and different forms of identity—including personal identities, managerial identities and social identities—have been examined (Watson, 2008). Identity sustains a fundamental bridge between different levels of analysis of socially constructed realities—individuals and collective units including groups, organisations (Ybema et al., 2009)—and, as such, it represents a critical element for the development of a holistic understanding of life. Research into identity explores the distinctiveness of individuals in social settings (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008) and enables further understanding of the dynamics between individuals, groups, communities and social fields (Knights & Willmott, 1987; Alvesson, 2002; Smircich, 1983).

The dynamic interplay between individuals and their social settings illustrates the intertwined nature of individual agency and organisational culture. Within the social sciences, the link between the individual agent and their social setting is emphasised in the search for a broader understanding of socially constructed realities and it is perceived as a critical constituent in research concerning subjectively constructed identities (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner, 1974; Giddens 1984). This is because, although it is broadly agreed that culture and identity represent subjectively constructed realities, these realities emerge through participation in and engagement with pre-existing (yet dynamic) social structures, which may be considered as objective realities. Ybema et al. (2009, p. 303) argue that a multiplicity of situational factors will influence identity formation and that ‘social identities can be theorised as the refracted articulation of agency and structure, playing out in different forms in different discursive domains and temporal spaces’.

Identity can be used as a novel, interpretive approach to analyse organisations. Identity—whether referred to as subjectively available self-narratives (Clarke, Brown & Hailey, 2009), as a dynamic and continuously changing sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), or as subjective meaning and experience (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008)—represents a theoretical concept that allows exploration into issues such as: meaning making; groups and boundaries; engagement, motivation and commitment; and, agency and practice. According to Brown and Phua (2011) understanding the role of identity and ‘self’ is central to the task of construction managers of project organisation. They suggest that people in construction organisations develop a sense of self through reflection of cultural artefacts, interaction and communicative practices. This is a complex
process founded upon an intricate interplay between power, social and institutional structures, which blurs the boundaries between conscious and unconscious engagement in identity development (Bucholtz, 1999) and poses questions as to whether or not a person's identity represents a unified whole. The latter point is recognised by Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) as one of two key concerns related to identity. They argue that identity is problematic, firstly, in relation to its durability and, secondly, in regards to its integrated or fragmented nature.; whilst they assume the 'presence of multiple, shifting and competing identities', they also question how in particular situations 'identities may appear orderly and integrated' (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008, p. 6).

This multiplicity and the blurred associations between the objective and subjective realities (dualism) can pose significant challenges in developing meaningful discursive narratives warranting new kinds of subjectivism (Deetz, 2003). For example, how are industry structure, legal structure and project structure embedded in objectively or subjectively constructed realities? What impact will this have on personal identities and group identity? These questions have bearings on construction organisations and addressing the dynamic between objective structures and subjective realities can provide important insights into the social dynamics that form part of, and influence, practice and interaction within and between construction organisations. Through a review of existing scholarship concerning two particular theoretical positions, namely Habermas' (1972) cognitive interest theory and Martin's (2002) cultural perspective theory, this paper considers these questions and aims to provide a framework for understanding the role of identity in construction organisations. The paper outlines Habermas' concept of 'cognitive interests', relates it to Martin's (2002) cultural perspective theory and, subsequently, establishes the concept of three epistemological spaces—'integration-technical', 'differentiation-practical' and 'fragmentation-emancipation'. This is followed by an exploration of how epistemological spaces manifest within project organisations through the actions and interactions of practitioners. It is argued that the epistemological spaces provide structures for relationships that are salient for the development of identity, including the formation of the 'aspirations identities' of practitioners; that is, they provide a lens with which the discourse of aspirations identities can be interpreted and connections between identity and practice can be made.

2. Discourse of 'identity' through epistemological spaces

2.1 Identity and cognitive interests: Habermas' social theory

Held (2001, p. 402) writes in his introduction to Habermas' theory that '[t]hrough an assessment of the self-formative processes of the human species, Habermas's critical theory aims to further the self-understanding of social groups capable of transforming society'. One of Habermas' fundamental concepts is that of 'cognitive interests', which represents his first attempt in specifying the relationship between knowledge and human activity (Held, 2001: 404). Since it was first introduced in the publication Knowledge and Human Interests (Habermas, 1972), the theory of cognitive interests have been adopted and critiqued by a number of scholars from a range of disciplines, including education and cultural analysis (e.g. Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008; Willmott, 1997). It is not our intention in this paper to provide a comprehensive analysis of Habermas' theoretical framework, its development, influence and critique. Rather, we explore how the concept of cognitive interests has
been adopted by authors such as Willmott (1997) and Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008), and how it is used to explore processes of self-formation.

In short, Habermas’ theory of cognitive interests is an exploration of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge. Habermas emphasises the role of historically positioned cognising subjects who constitute knowledge from the basis of their historical material conditions. He argues that humans organise their experience is organised in terms of a priori—‘basis’—interests that reflect their technological and linguistic nature. Humans have an interest in ‘the creation of knowledge which would enable it to control objectified processes and to maintain communication’ (Held, 2001, p. 403); they have technical and interpretive interests that reflect the needs to ‘produce from nature what is needed for material existence [...] and communicate with others through the use of intersubjectively understood symbols’ (Held, 2001, p. 403). In addition to these interests, humans have, according to Habermas, an interest in the reflective appropriation of life, in self-reflection, self-determination and rationality. Such knowledge generates autonomy and responsibility and is conditioned by an emancipatory interest.

The three different cognitive interests are associated with a particular type of scientific inquiry and have become associated with different approaches to learning. Subsequently, they are often spoken of as different ‘identities’, reflecting different dispositions—instrumental, practical or emancipator—to practice and knowledge. Willmott (1997) explains that technical cognitive interest is based on a rational instrumental approach for understanding actions-interactions, knowledge generation and problems solving in social spaces (e.g. organisations, groups, projects etc). It is driven by the ‘empirical-analytic science’, which intends to calculate and remove all forms of formal irrationality to enhance prediction and control of functions in socially constructed realities. Individuals driven by this cognitive interest will focus on identification and manipulation of social variables that is perceived to impact some form of performance agenda, they will hold a positivist world-view and believe that social spaces can be calculated and controlled. A person displaying an identity underpinned by this cognitive interest will often assume that ambiguities in the social setting can be eradicated through removing irrationalities and, as a consequence, deny ambiguity (Alvesson, 2002).

Practical-hermeneutic or interpretive cognitive interest contests the ideas of attaining effectiveness through manipulation of social realities. This cognitive interest, which is driven by the interpretativist approach, focuses on “symbolic communication” to remove “misunderstandings” (Willmott, 1997) in social spaces. This fosters an understanding of ‘how to achieve common interpretations of situations so that coordinated action is possible’ (Smircich, 1983: p. 351). The identities driven by practical cognitive interests generally support the idea that developing an appreciation of the meanings, symbolism and ideas within social spaces can assist in removing unnecessary misunderstandings and assume that ambiguities in social spaces can be dealt with through communicative action (Alvesson, 2002).

The emancipatory cognitive interest is based on ‘critical science’ and intends to develop more rational social relations’ through social realisation (Willmott 1997: 317). Willmott (1997) explains that identities underpinned by this cognitive interest tend to seek to expose any form of domination and exploitation and remove any unnecessary suffering in social spaces. Individuals holding such
cognitive interest will generally aim to enlighten other members in their social space about the exploitation and domination they endure, and subsequently transform the way they operate. The main focus of the emancipatory approach is to understand the negative features of social spaces, by deciphering the taken-for-granted actions and interactions. Through critical reflection, individuals holding an emancipator interest will be able to understand irreconcilable tensions in social spaces (Martin, 2002), subsequently acknowledging the existence of ambiguity as a normal and salient part of social space.

On the basis of this theoretical framework, it can be presumed that, in relation to the construction sector, practitioners and managers will hold different identities that reflect their cognitive interests and that their professional background and practice will vary accordingly. Whilst the question of how these factors influence practitioners in forming their identity is beyond the scope of this paper, the subsequent sections will explore how cognitive interests form part of epistemological spaces that influence socially constructed identities.

### 2.2 Identity and social spaces: Martin’s three cultural perspectives

According to the framework outlined above, the three cognitive interests will support particular interpretations and understandings of action, interaction, knowledge and problem solving in social spaces, such as organisations, groups and projects. In the context of this paper, we consider social spaces as cultures (Alvesson, 2002; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Smircich, 1983); that is, as particular social constructs that are determined not by their cultural artefacts but by the abilities, notions and forms of behaviour that is acquired through membership in a social setting. Martin (2002) offers three cultural perspectives that can be used to analyse social spaces, namely ‘integration’, ‘differentiation’ and ‘fragmentation’ (see also: Meyerson & Martin, 1987). These three perspectives reflect, firstly, how members in a social space deal with ambiguity and, secondly, how they share cultural manifestations, such as values, beliefs and symbols, within a social space. That is, social spaces can be categorised according to the extent of harmony, paradoxes and conflicts that arise through the acceptance or rejection of ambiguity and common cultural manifestations. This argument can be aligned with Habermas’ three cognitive interests; an interjection that may provide an interesting epistemological platform for discussion of socially constructed phenomena. In the purview of this paper the proposed ‘epistemological spaces’ created by the dynamic interplay between the characteristics of the social space and cognitive interest is used to inform the discursive practices relating to the practice and research on identity.

According to Martin (2002, 2004), integrated social spaces embody consistency in relation to cultural manifestations and there will be a general consensus on issues amongst all members of the social space. Various levels in the social hierarchy display similar viewpoints and cultural expressions within the space will be monolithic, integrated and homogeneous. Due to the harmonious nature of the social space, any form of ambiguity is eliminated. Identities consumed in an integrated space reflect a commitment to organisational control, work ethic and organisational effectiveness. It can be argued that integrated social spaces will be dominated by actions and interactions driven by ‘technical’ interest, due their intent to calculate and remove formal irrationality and create consensus within the
social space. For the purposes of the later discussion, this space is called the ‘Integration-Technical epistemological space’.

Whilst integrated social spaces are characterised by consensus, differentiated social spaces reflect both consistency and inconsistency among cultural manifestations. That is, consensus will exist within groups or section of the social space but not between them and, as a consequence, disagreements between members of this space will be emphasised. Although ambiguity is acknowledged, it channels it to outside sub-cultures (for example, in relation to construction projects, architects may channel ambiguity to contractors and vice versa). Identities consumed in a differentiated space will support some level of control within sections of the group, which may limit some ambiguity, however misunderstandings are inevitable between social spaces. It can be argued that differentiated social spaces will be dominated by action and interaction driven by ‘practical-hermeneutic’ interests, due to a focus on symbolic communication (aimed at the removal of misunderstandings). For the purposes of the later discussion, this space is called the ‘Differentiation-Practical epistemological space’ (Martin, 2002, 2004).

In contrast to integrated and differentiated social spaces, a fragmented social space is characterised by lack of clarity, confusion and inconsistency. Cultural manifestations may not be shared by members of the social space, creating paradoxical situations that may lead to conflicts. This space accepts ambiguity as inevitable and it is typically characterised by individuals who believe that dealing with ambiguity is part of business and who makes conscious attempts to remove negative features that arise out the inconsistencies or paradoxes. Fragmented social spaces is more aligned with individuals who hold an emancipatory cognitive interest and who, as a result, is more open to and able to deal with inconsistency and ambiguity. For the purposes of discussion, this space is called the ‘Fragmented-emancipatory epistemological space’ (Martin, 2002, 2004; Meyerson, 1991).

Martins’ three cultural perspectives and Habermas’ three cognitive interests provide the basis to interpret the structure-agency link critical for how identities may support practice. The notion of structure (social space) and agency (driven by cognitive interests) can be used to explore the emergence and theorisation of harmony, paradoxes and conflicts in construction project organisations. The three cultural perpectives and the three cognitive interests offer epistemological spaces for analysis of both individuals and groups (Clarke, Brown & Hailey, 2009).

2.3 Exploring identities in construction through ‘epistemological spaces’

It grasping the complexity surrounding identity in the construction domain, it is essential to deconstruct the social spaces of projects and the roles that practitioners in construction projects perform. The key role of a construction practitioner is to ensure that a functional building is delivered through controlling available, often limited, resources; it involves calculation and control of the scope of works to deliver enhance outcomes of design and construction through effective project scheduling, cost control and people management (e.g. reduce disputes) (Brown & Phua, 2011). In assuming their roles, the aspirational identities of practitioners play a critical role in the way projects operate (Brown & Phua, 2011); that is, what role people aspire for within a project and how they wish to be perceived
by others will have a critical effect on the discourse of a project. Brown and Phua (2011, p. 90) suggest that ‘research across the social sciences and humanities has long suggested that people work continuously on fashioning preferred versions of their selves’. Therefore, understanding the structure-agency of this discourse, that is the epistemological, has the potential to unravel the complex issues that drive particular behaviours in projects.

Identity is shaped by structural and historical positions of members of a social space. The identity of most practitioners in the construction sector is entrenched in the projects, the permanent organisations and the broader institutional structures (such as professions) within which they reside. Loosely coupled firms in a transient relationship differentiate project organisations from permanent organisations (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Turner, Huemann & Keegan, 2008). The transient and discontinuing nature of project organisations offers constant opportunities for members to reconstruct themselves to new structural surrounding (Muller & Turner, 2007). Therefore it is imperative that any identity work in construction sector will benefit from situating the ‘self’; that is, placing the managers as agents within the structure of the construction industry and project organisations (Turner & Muller, 2003).

To form loosely coupled project based organisations, firms performing design and construction operations are generally drawn into contractual arrangements that are changing and temporal (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Turner, Huemann & Keegan, 2008). The principal aim of projects is to organise human and non-human resources to accomplish unique project outcomes that deliver a product, or service, or both (Turner & Munner, 2003). Project organisations are often described as fragmented, something which is perceived as contributing to inefficient work practices (Berggren, Soderlund & Anderson, 2001). Fragmentation in these circumstances commonly refers to the organisational disfunctionalities and misalignments that elements optimal performance (Berggren, Soderlund & Anderson, 2001; Baiden, Price & Dainty, 2006). Projects are most often characterised by: uniqueness (heterogeneous products and processes), uncertainty, goal misalignment, agency representation, staged operations and boundaries (e.g. structural organisation of professions and functions).

These features directly contribute to project and organisational fragmentation. For example, the uniqueness of each project requires that an account for unknown parameters is created on a project-by-project basis. This contributes to uncertainty in the project environment, which warrants careful allocation of risk among the firms in a project (Lam et al., 2007). Risk perception, on the other hand, is partly driven by procurement/contractual arrangements and by the culture/identity of the project team members. The perception of inappropriate allocation of risks among the firms/team members can lead to the feeling of lack of fairness, which may contribute to further fragmentation between members (agents), with flow-on effects to other aspects of the project (Zaghloul & Hartman, 2003). Moreover, misaligned goals between project members and contracts (Cox, 1996) can create unnecessary boundaries (Usdiken, Soxen & Enblyaoglu, 1988), bringing fragmentation, ambiguity and conflict to the surface (Meyerson, 1991; Martin, 2002). Based on this narrative, fragmentation entails misalignment of, within and across the structural and agency parameters leading to chaos and conflicts (Martin, 2002).
In lieu of this, overcoming fragmentation and reaching integration is often proposed as an essential function of successful project management. Indeed, the call for integration as a means to enhance project outcomes and improve competitive advantage resonates across the literature in the domains of organisation, information and supply chain management (Fawcett & Magnan, 2002; Baiden & Price, 2011). Ghoshal and Gratton (2002), for example, discuss integration in the context of an enterprise. They identify four important aspects of organisational integration: namely, operational integration (through standard technological infrastructure), intellectual integration (through shared knowledge and information base), social integration (though collective bonds of performance) and emotional integration (though shared identity and meaning). Such diverse forms of integration across both organisations themselves and the project alliances they form, highlight the inherently multi-faceted and complex nature of integration. Based on this narrative, ingenerated environments espouse for consistency and harmony in the agents, excluding, and to a greater extent denying, ambiguity (Martin, 2002).

The above narration of projects as social spaces with different structural and agency arrangements indicate that practitioners can assume an epistemological space and will position themselves in relation to the narratives they construct as agents. This enables identification of how managers—consciously or unconsciously—construct their ‘aspirational identities’ in positioning themselves through different structure-agency practices, which may change depending on contractual arrangements and procurement methods (e.g. construct only, design and build, alliancing etc.). In the following section, we will discuss the possible development of aspirational identities through a theoretical exploration of Martins’ cultural perspective and Habermas’ cognitive interest theory.

3. ‘Aspirational Identities’: The Propositions

3.1 The integration-technical epistemological space

Construction managers occupying the integration-technical epistemological space may argue for an explicit unitary project culture. Based on the theoretical framework presented above, it can be hypothesised that they will seek to develop and extend shared values and systems by focusing on an integration agenda, which assumes that the greater the level of integration across an organisation the lesser the effects of fragmentation. They will see ambiguity as a problem that should be eliminated at every possible level, and that they will use tools to manipulate systems and behaviours with the aim of gaining control of the project through eliminating irrationalities in the construction process (Willmott, 1997).

The ‘aspirational identity’ of a manager in this space will be dominated by calculation and control to deliver project performance: to be able to coordinate and monitor the diverse groups of participants and their operations in a construction project. They will be focused on proposing tools and systems to monitor the progress made towards the achievement of the stakeholders’ goals, specifically complete the project within the predetermined cost, quality and time. Moreover, they will strive for shared expertise and remove any irrational boundaries among different units to predict and control project duration and costs accurately.
3.2 The fragmentation-emancipation epistemological space

It can be hypothesised that construction managers who occupy the fragmentation-emancipation epistemological space assume that the project environments display consistent and inconsistent beliefs, systems and processes that contribute to inherent ambiguity and lack of clarity. Organisations operating in fragmented environments are characterised by contradictions and paradoxes (e.g. through information conflicts, unreasonable risk exposure) that may contribute to unnecessary suffering of members. Projects will have issue-specific consensus, but the overall environment will be dominated by lack of consensus. Managers in this epistemological space are likely to accept ambiguity as an inevitable component of usual business (Meyerson, 1991). They will in most circumstances not hold the view of control and manipulation and will not seek solutions that are only explicitly linkable to performance measures. Rather, they it can be expected that they will support ‘emancipation’, which is underpinned by the ‘critical science’ paradigm. This space is about transforming organisations through rational social relations and making people realise their potential (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992).

The epistemological analysis in this space is concerned with the removal of ‘unnecessary suffering’ in organisations (Willmott, 1997). The aspirational identity of managers assuming this space will be dominated by transforming organisations to provide a better environment for project progress. They will be keen to identify the taken for granted beliefs on the negative features of organisational life and exploitative practices; they will be driven by the desire to develop an understanding of, and to counteract, the taken-for-granted beliefs relating to exploitation and domination of relationships between members, while encouraging them to transform the way they operate. Managers assuming this aspirational identity will focus on grasping the traditional patterns and the repressive aspects of culture whilst liberating the project organisation from its traditional environment. It includes understanding irreconcilable tensions between opposites, sometimes described as ironies, paradoxes, or contradictions (Martin, 2002).

3.3 The ‘differentiation-practical’ epistemological space

In between the ‘integration-technical’ and ‘fragmentation-emancipation’ spaces sit the ‘differentiation-practical’ epistemological space. On the basis of the theoretical framework it can be hypothesised that the construction managers occupying this space might assume that consistency and consensus (or integration) is possible within some units or groups in organisations but not across them. Existence of ambiguity and misunderstandings is not totally denied in this space, but channel to the interface between sub groups or subculture (Martin, 2002).

Managers in this space may not take an optimistic view as in the ‘technical’ space, where the assumption is that managers have significant control over issues impacting performance (Alvesson, 2002). Managers are most likely to acknowledge misunderstandings and negotiate these through engagement and communication. The aim of this space is ‘to achieve common interpretations of situations [for] coordinated action’ (Smircich, 1983a, p. 351), and relates to the removal of misunderstandings among groups to achieve coordinated action. The ‘practical-hermeneutic’ tradition to studying organisations involves observing and interpreting organisations through ‘appreciation’
rather than ‘calculation and manipulation’ (Willmott, 1997). The focus of managers will be on addressing communication issues to improve information flows and thereby attempting to reduce misunderstanding. This space is commonly adopted in construction project management (Ochieng & Price, 2010).

4. Concluding remarks

By studying identity and how it underpins practice within construction (project) organisations, it is possible to explore discursive practices between ‘structure and agency’ at differed levels: the individual, group, organisational project and industry. The three hypothetical ‘aspirational identities’ contextualised in the different epistemological spaces illustrate how the concept of ‘identity’ can be used as an analytical approach to explore a range of phenomena in the construction sector, including professional practice, collaboration, communication, claims and adversarial behaviour.

Although the three epistemological spaces, ‘integration-technical’, ‘differentiation-practical’ and fragmentation-emancipation’, are key in positioning various ‘structure-agency’ interactions, it will be an over simplification to assume that each manager’s ‘identity’ will neatly fit into only one of the spaces. The construct of identity is complex and it should be acknowledged that managers would hold multiple ‘identities’ that may be narrated ‘selectively’ based on a particular structural environment. The propositions above can be employed to further explore a number of identity related research areas in construction. It raises questions such as, for example, how does epistemological space form part of particular organisational phenomena—e.g. innovation, collaboration, negotiation and leadership—and, how does the association between objective and socially constructed realities support and manifest as practice?

5. References


