# We Are Projects: Narrative Capital and Meaning Making in Projects

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**Abstract**

Research on projects has to a limited degree taken issue with how projects are chief producers of meaning at work. We develop the concept of *narrative capital* as a basic mechanism for how people can engender meaning in and through projects in organizations. Narrative capital is derived from experiences that people appropriate into their individual and collective life stories, retrospectively, as adding to a repertoire of accumulated learning and mastering, and prospectively, in terms of living with purpose and hope. We chart implications for meaning making in projects as expanding ownership, expanding connections of impact, and extending narrative possibility.

The first two years, seriously, I hoped for a small heart attack so I could say that I had to quit

—Carlsen and Pitsis, "Experiencing Hope in Organizational Lives," 2009 (p. 78) [1] (interview

with headmaster leading a school transformation project)

In his classic article "From Meaning to Method," Max van Manen (1997, p. 345)

inspires us to pay attention to the textual meaning of those we seek to study because a "good

phenomenological text has the effect of making us suddenly 'see' something in a manner that

enriches our understanding of everyday life experiences."  In the simple quote from the

school headmaster above, one may glean a multitude of insights about life in projects—of a

person's commitment to that project to the point where the only way out at times seems

through a heart attack. In that single sentence, one can imagine and empathize with the stress

and challenges this leader endured as he tried to transform the school from a run-down,

hopeless place struggling to attract any students at all, into the leading school of its kind in the

country (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a).  In project management research and practice, we have all

too often allowed method to preclude meaning (Cicmil, 2006), to the point that we no longer

hear or even listen to the voices and experiences of those living, breathing, and kindling life

into those projects. Losing meaning, whether in research or life, means losing out on what

makes projects powerful.

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[1] When revisiting this example throughout the article, we build on the article by Carlsen and Pitsis (2009a) and our continued research on the same organization by the first author. This has involved a series of interviews and talks with the headmaster, as well as repeated site visits at the school and informal conversations with teachers and students over the last 10 years. We use this example in a strictly illustrative manner.

This article sets out to develop the concept of *narrative capital* as a basic mechanism for how people can engender meaning in and through projects at work. Projects are increasingly acknowledged as vehicles for how people get things done in organizations (Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018; Lundin et al., 2015), whether that means delivering services, creating and producing things, or facilitating change and innovation (Davies et al., 2018). Projects as a particular form of temporary team-based work practice are, however, largely unrecognized as chief producers of meaning in organizations (Rosso et al., 2010). Research suggests that work practices may facilitate multiple sources of meaning in organizations. This may include a sense of calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), the intrinsic joy of doing things well (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) or the ability to do well *for* others (Bolino & Grant, 2016), and *with* others (Colbert et al., 2016). All of these sources of meaning are in principle relevant also for projects as a specific form of organizational practice. But our focus as to the reason why projects may be the number one meaning maker in organizations lies elsewhere.

In this essay, we focus on projects as conduits to creating and sustaining meaningfulness at work. We advocate for more understanding of the inherent meaning making potentials in projects: Projects can serve a fundamental function of creating progression in the experiencing of work-related identities (Dutton et al., 2010) that can be seen as ongoing life stories. This is so because projects play a major role in structuring the spatio-temporal experience at work, and people create, alter, or sustain their identities through practices that are organized as projects. Projects, in short, are naturally storied units of experiencing that play vital roles in how people enrich their lives through remembering past experiences and imagining the new. To give this flesh, we develop the concept of *narrative capital* (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009b; Scheibe, 2000) to explore how people engender meaning in and from projects as being related to their sense of self. With narrative capital, we understand the appropriating of some desirable time-bound experiences into individual and organizational

life stories, either as projects passed, or those orienting what people hope for when living life forward. Appropriating involves both backwards-looking reflection and forward-looking imagination. Narrative capital is thus comprised of storied units of meaning that are important both in the sense of retrospectively building a repertoire of competence-enhancing experiences and sustaining positive legacies, and prospectively in terms of generating new possibilities for development and growth. Thus, we see narrative capital as closely tied to projects as a temporal phenomenon in realizing possibilities (following Schutz, 1967; Schutz & Wagner, 1970) and enriching people's lives. Like other constructs of human capital[2], the concept of narrative capital accentuates the positive connotations of accumulation of something of social value. We shall return to the more precarious and potentially negative sides of narrative capital towards the end of the article.

We tie the concept of narrative capital to the framing and delivery of projects. Doing so, we unabashedly privilege the actors, and human experience, to explore how particular forms of meaning making may both produce positive identities in the workplace and positively influence project success. We begin with two core assumptions: (1) at the organizational level, projects are the fundamental tools used in organizations to realize strategy and getting things done; and (2) at the individual level, projects are the conduit to self-development and meaning making. We make no causal claims that meaning making always underpins performance, or that projects are reducible to narrative capital. Rather, we are exploring how,
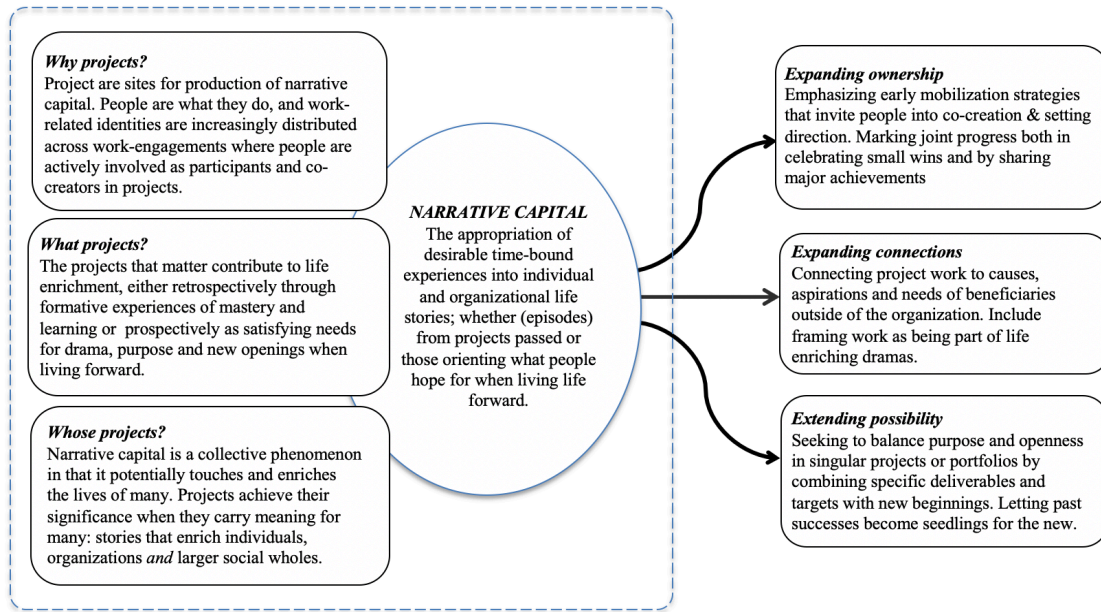
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[2] It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a complete inventory of how narrative capital relates to associated constructs of psychological capital, social capital, and cultural capital, but we would like to make a few remarks. First, psychological capital (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017) has typically been explored as an individual-level construct and while it has recently been developed as a collective phenomenon (Dawkins, Martin, Scott, & Sanderson, 2015), it does not incorporate either consideration of meaning making or identity from a temporal perspective of experience (Carlsen, Hagen, & Mortensen, 2012). Second, cultural capital carries a treatment of temporal tensions of how people's capacities to project forward are conditioned by their prior sociocultural habitus, but this is a concept that is more directed at understanding social differentiation (Bourdieu, 1986; Robbins, 2005) than identity-related growth through meaning making. Finally, social capital is roughly understood as the goodwill (Adler & Kwon, 2002) and resources that inhere and flow in networks of social relationships (Baker & Dutton, 2007). While narrative capital has a social dimension, it is more concerned with the temporalities of remembering and anticipating in meaning making than in the ongoing production of relationships.

as the title of our essay suggests, in a basic way, people are the culmination of their projects, how people need projects for life enrichment, and what this implicates for meaning making in organizations. We are projects in terms of where we belong; even more so, we are projects in what we become (Carlsen, 2009).

In a philosophical sense, our ideas of projects correspond to the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, in particular as interpreted by Thomas Alexander's (2013) idea of *The Human Eros*. In its most basic interpretation, *The Human Eros* denotes our search for meaning—meaning fundamentally steeped in a qualitative engagement with the world we live in.  Meanings can be found in the artifacts of our human existence, in our successes and our failures, and in our daily practice. Projects, in short, serve vital functions of remembering, attending and projecting in this ongoing meaning making. Meaning so conceived is a form of imagination that is "an operation in the present, establishing continuity with the past and anticipating the future" (Alexander, 1993, p. 387). Now, while Alexander refers more to a pragmatic imagination, consistent with Deweyan philosophy, we see projects as the material, naturalistic, and humanistic acts through which imagination becomes a quest for meaning. People need projects to produce meaning, not just for the individual but to fulfill societal missions more broadly, be it a moon landing, restoring a run-down school or a caring for a small community garden in a poor area of the city.

We offer a theorizing of projects as potential generators of narrative capital, conceived through six sections. In the first three of these sections, we lay the theoretical groundwork, mainly drawing on narrative psychology, pragmatism, and narrative identity theory as applied to organizations and projects. In the last three sections, we discuss implications for research and practice: What new research questions are implied by a theory of projects as generators of narrative capital, and how might project managers act on these insights? Figure 1 provides an overview of the theoretical argument and some of its implications.

**Figure 1 The concept of narrative capital in projects: Underpinnings and implications**



*Why projects?*
Project are sites for production of narrative capital. People are what they do, and work-related identities are increasingly distributed across work-engagements where people are actively involved as participants and co-creators in projects.

*What projects?*
The projects that matter contribute to life enrichment, either retrospectively through formative experiences of mastery and learning or prospectively as satisfying needs for drama, purpose and new openings when living forward.

*Whose projects?*
Narrative capital is a collective phenomenon in that it potentially touches and enriches the lives of many. Projects achieve their significance when they carry meaning for many: stories that enrich individuals, organizations *and* larger social wholes.

*NARRATIVE CAPITAL*
The appropriation of desirable time-bound experiences into individual and organizational life stories; whether (episodes) from projects passed or those orienting what people hope for when living life forward.

*Expanding ownership*
Emphasizing early mobilization strategies that invite people into co-creation & setting direction. Marking joint progress both in celebrating small wins and by sharing major achievements

*Expanding connections*
Connecting project work to causes, aspirations and needs of beneficiaries outside of the organization. Include framing work as being part of life enriching dramas.

*Extending possibility*
Seeking to balance purpose and openness in singular projects or portfolios by combining specific deliverables and targets with new beginnings. Letting past successes become seedlings for the new.

## Why Projects? Tell Me About Your Projects and I'll Tell You Who You Are

The idea that people are their projects can be traced back to at least two sets of sources. One is the notion of a distributed self, originating from the work of Jerome Bruner (1990, pp. 106–107; see also Little, 1993), who suggested seeing identity less as a nuclear core and more as a "swarm of participations" distributed over a range of contexts and engagements whereby people meet social expectations and acknowledgment as participants. Conceived as such, peoples' identities are to no small degree a function of the social worlds they are engaged in, and projects may form the nuclei of these social worlds. Thus, selves are distributed over projects as *discourses* where meaning is negotiated between protagonists and stakeholders in the outside world (including external project participants and beneficiaries).

Selves are also distributed in projects as social *practices* (Bruner, 1990, p. 116–118) whereby people are actively involved in various undertakings as participants and co-creators. People's identities are not mere psychosocial constructions hoovering above the ground of social practice (Dreier, 1999). Rather, identities are achieved in social action and unfold along

trajectories of social practice (Carlsen, 2009; Holland et al., 1998) and the particulars of value creating activities that people are engaged in at work. Such value-creating activities may have strands of professional identity (Pratt et al., 2006) that differ substantially among types of projects, such as research projects versus consulting projects (Empson, 2013), or product development projects versus systems deliverables (Carlsen, 2006). In project-based organizations, projects are at the center of practice, the "embodied, materially [and symbolically] mediated arrays of human activity" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 2). Thus, when we say that people are what they do (Carlsen, 2009; Holland et al, 1998), we could also say that we are our projects. For the headmaster in the opening sequence example, this indeed seemed the case. The rest of his professional life took place at the school, and the transformation and further development of the school in many ways became a lifelong personal project pursuit (Little et al., 2017) that formed his professional and personal identity (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a). But all this in itself is only part of the story.

## What Projects? Mundane Projects and Projects for Life

Projects of course differ widely in objectives, rhythm, division of labor, participation within and across organizations, time length, and magnitude—whether economically, with regard to what is at stake, and for whom. Few projects that people engage in at work are life enriching in ways that leave lasting influences on their sense of self. Which projects then matter the most, or more precisely, *how* are projects *made* to matter and produce narrative capital?

Some projects are from the start set up to pursue a calling, like creative projects that fulfill deeply held personal and professional passions (Svejenova et al., 2011), or megaprojects that represent iconic monuments of economic, aesthetic, political, and technological significance (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Pitsis et al., 2003). Between the range of

precharged projects and the more mundane and routine undertakings, lies a vast territory of opportunity for meaning making.  We suggest that projects matter because, and when, they can produce meaning making as life enrichment, either through retelling and remembering stories of what was, or through projecting stories of what could be. Narrative psychology and narrative identity theory postulate that narratives are basic cultural forms that render sequences of human experiences and intentions meaningful through time (Bruner, 1990; MacIntyre, 1981; Mitchell, 1981; Sarbin, 1986). People experience their lives through evolving life stories that they continuously construct and reconstruct to make sense of their past and anticipate their future (Bruner, 1990; Crites, 1971; McAdams, 1993, 2001). In a retrospective sense, projects may contribute to narrative capital because they produce formative experiences  in peoples' lives that can contribute to legacies (Bednar, 2013), build self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000) and leave something behind for future generations (McAdams & Guo, 2015). This is the meaning of narrative capital that is the closest to the work of Karl Scheibe (1986, 2000), who used the term to denote the value of chapters added to individual life stories. To Scheibe, narrative capital results from embarking upon time-bound and goal-directed adventures where challenges are met, and risks are handled:

> The value of such action is that the consequences of having enjoyed such thrilling experiences flow beyond the bounds of the occasion. One tells stories about these events, "dines out on them," elaborates and embroiders on successive retellings. In this fashion, the life story of the participant is enriched (Scheibe, 1986, p. 136)

It is inherent in these statements, though less articulated, that projects may also produce stories that are lived-in narratives. People not only use stories to make sense of their past or celebrate their accomplishments but grab plotlines that inform what they attend to, enact, and deem important when living life forward (Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1991). This dimension of narrative capital has been further emphasized and developed by Carlsen and Pitsis (2009b), who underlined the projective element of life enrichment associated with moving horizons of

expectation and hope in the stories of what could be. From such a projective perspective, narrative capital may also be associated with unpredictability and risk as valuable in itself (Kvalnes, 2016), because projects are arenas where people satisfy fundamental needs of experiencing drama (Carlsen, 2008) and purpose (Pitsis et al., 2003). Narrative capital engenders a form of possibility thinking that in itself is the foundation of creative thought, involving "the posing, in multiple ways, of the question 'What if?'" (Craft et al., 2007, p. 2). In short, we are the stories of the projects we remember because they made a difference for ourselves and others, and those that we anticipate because they provide hope when living forward.

## Whose Projects? One, No One and One Hundred Thousand

So far in this article, we have described narrative capital as something that may be taken to belong primarily to individuals. Let us broaden it. *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* was the title of the famous novel by Nobel Laureate Luigi Pirandello (1926/1992)—a philosophical chronicle of identity and madness that was much ahead of its time. The protagonist in the novel starts a frantic search for his true self (to the point of trying to grasp an image of his true self in the mirror while his conscious self is not watching, or being jealous of the version of himself that his wife is in love with) and realizes that he is simultaneously one, no one, and a multitude. Then nothing matters. By parallel, while narrative capital can be experienced as deeply personal, it contracts into nothingness when tied exclusively to one person—when it is not shared. Narrative capital is a collective phenomenon not just because it is produced in collective practices and negotiated with the collective language resources of a multitude of stakeholders, but also because it potentially touches and enriches the lives of many. The transformation of the high school that we have referred to would hardly be of much consequence if considered the sole adventure of the headmaster. Rather, the project gains its force precisely because it engages a broad array of

stakeholders, not just other teachers, or students and their caretakers, but also those having a stake in developing a socioeconomically disadvantaged part of the city (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a) or exploring new avenues of how the high school can fulfill broader societal missions, such as for example handling immigration well.

More principally, it is misguided to equate narrative capital with individual identity alone. Self-stories proceed from mind to culture as well as from culture to mind (Bruner, 1990, p. 108). Experiences from projects have multiple addressees and gain their momentum for that very reason. Project identities evolve alongside identities of organizations or individuals (Lundin et al., 2015, p. 106). Thus, projects may be sites for authoring stories of individuals within stories of organizations within stories of larger social wholes and struggles (Holland & Lave, 2001; Mills, 1959/2000), and self is always located in a social world (Berger, 1966). Winning a medal at the Olympics or a turning around a high school are types of experiences that are likely to be attributed to the protagonist individuals involved and may leave lasting imprints in their life stories. Such experiences may also be attributed to a team (e.g., cycling team, team of teachers), an organization (e.g., a cycling association, the school as a whole), an industry or a city, a tradition (of training or pedagogy), or even a nation. Thus, narrative capital, much like projects, resists a clear separation between individual and collective levels of analysis.

Recognizing the collective dimension of narrative capital of course also complicates matters. One cannot assume that the meanings that people derive from projects are uniform across stakeholders. Indeed, megaprojects, like getting ready for the Olympics (Pitsis et al., 2003) or building a high-speed train (Van Marrewijk, 2017), are often charged with politics (Flyvbjerg, 2014) that are partly due to variation of local interpretation—a symbolic multivocality (Van Marrewijk, 2017) that both adds to the potentials and complexities of meaning making.

In summary, our first three sections have emphasized a focus on the narrative of *why* projects, *what* projects, and a collective sense of *whose* projects. We have established that projects are sites for production of narrative capital through life enrichment, that the projects that are likely to matter the most satisfy fundamental needs for mastery, drama, purpose, and hope, and that narrative capital is a collective phenomenon that gains its significance from touching and enriching the lives of many. What are the theoretical and practical implications of this set of conceptions? How can one ensure that narrative capital of projects is sustained, shared, and owned by many in a way that is also productive for project execution? The three remaining sections address these questions.

**Expanding Ownership: Your and Our Projects**

The American-South African biographical sports drama film *Invictus* tells the story of how the new South African nation under the leadership of Nelson Mandela experienced a moment of national transformation when the national team Springboks won the 1995 Rugby World Cup. Based on John Carlin's book *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation*, it tells the story of how the Springboks team was not expected to perform well at the competition having just returned to high-level international competition following the dismantling of apartheid. Springboks were perceived as a redneck team that to many blacks represented prejudice and apartheid. In the movie, there is a powerful scene of the first major meeting between Mandela and the captain of the Springboks, François Pienaar. The meeting is in many ways a showcase of leadership through building high-quality connections (Stephens et al., 2012) and has at its core a set of open-ended questions: "So tell me François, what is your philosophy of leadership? How do you inspire your men to be better than they think they can be?" The meeting works as an invitation to join forces and make the Rugby World Cup a shared project, one that can build bridges, unite people, and

inspire the nation. It succeeds; the project in many ways produced narrative capital for the larger project of reimagining the young nation (Farquharson & Marjoribanks, 2003).

This example and the previous three sections raise questions about the relationship between narrative capital and psychological ownership (Pierce et al., 2001) of projects and how such ownership is created. Previous research has suggested that attention to early comprehensive mobilization strategies is important to get projects right from the start, in terms of team formation and subsequent performance (Ericksen & Dyer, 2004). Likewise, other research has suggested that project managers should focus more on ramping up their project team and "getting fat fast" in the early phases, rather than on containing project costs (Van Oorschot et al., 2010). Future research may ask whether and how the early phase mobilization and team building of projects can be key to not just immediate performance, but also may have a longer term positive effect in meaning making through building a specific form of ownership (Dawkins et al., 2017) in narrative capital.

Recent research on episodes of deep help in complex projects (Fisher et al., 2018) indicates that actually accomplishing something may sometimes be subordinate to ownership. In one of the examples in the study, the client of a design firm has been somewhat unhappy with early drafts. The project leader, Carole, asks a colleague outside the project, Richard, for feedback on a pitch to the client. The help comes in the form of a takeover: "After listening to the team's pitch, Richard returned to the project space with Carole and reworked it himself. He then took over the client presentation. The project was quite successful, but Carole viewed the episode as among the most negative in her career" (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 1532). We see this as speaking to how distorted ownership may diminish narrative capital; Carole makes a negative attribution from the project to her own professional life story.

Another set of questions concerns how narrative capital can be built by fostering ownership retrospectively. Research on creative work has pointed to the importance of

marking progress, such as small wins, to boost motivation and performance (Amabile & Kramer, 2011) in subsequent innovation efforts. Facilitating the sharing of progress or success may have similar functions in building collective self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000), fostering co-active vicarious learning (Myers, 2014) as well as providing narrative capital for both individuals and the collective. In any newspaper interview or presentation about the turnaround process, the headmaster of the high school would emphasize the story as a joint undertaking, and one that mattered for the city neighborhood. Moreover, he would typically put students in the center and emphasize examples of their growth and participation in building the school. Time and effort on expanding a sense of psychological ownership is crucial for building narrative capital, which in turn gives way to expanding connection.

## Expanding Connection: Projects for the Other

Narrative capital stretches beyond the project as a time-bound event and beyond the organization. This implies that it is important to pay careful attention to and accentuate the ways that projects are made for others. The basic implication here is one of expanding connection by linking to stories unfolding outside the organizations. Projects that are made to matter do so because someone managed to demonstrate how they form part of extra-organizational development trajectories, be they disciplinary traditions, mythical structures, city development, or other larger social wholes (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009b). Recent research suggests that making such connections is integral to work on ideas in complex projects, in effect part of what makes ideas matter in a field of ideas, whether a genre of filmmaking or regional geology  (Coldevin et al., 2019).

A particularly vivid case of expanding connection can be found in a recent article on President Kennedy's leadership of NASA in the 1960s (Carton, 2018). Kennedy used five strategies for sense-giving, each of which helped employees see a stronger connection

between their work and NASA's ultimate aspirations, for example, through making distant aspirations more proximal, building stepping-stones toward grand aspirations and linking these further to personal contributions of employees. When such connections were the strongest, employees construed their day-to-day activities not as short-term tasks (''I'm mopping the floor'' or "I'm building electrical circuits'') but as part of the pursuit of larger objectives (''I'm putting a man on the moon'' or "I am advancing science").

Not all projects can be connected to the equivalence of moon landings. One larger lessons here is tied to motivational frames for action (Benford & Snow, 2000) that help people place their projects within larger stories where something vital is at stake, something that charges work with meaning. Examples include framing one's work—whether in a high school, an IT consulting firm, oil exploration, fishing, or communication work—as being part of life-enriching missions, battles, mysteries, treasure hunts, or cathedral building (Carlsen, 2008). Underpinning such motivational frames is the ongoing asking of a set of foundational questions: What is really at stake when venturing forth? What kind of life-enriching adventure is this project part of, and how could that matter to us in the everyday?

All this said, it cannot be assumed that any form of expansive connecting or motivational framing may be beneficial for actors' lives or their performance. A failure to connect everyday work to high aspirations may make people dispirited or alienated with perceptions of insurmountable aspiration gaps, and making such connections is far from trivial (Carton, 2018), as Flyvbjerg's (2014) work on megaprojects suggests. Motivational frames may seem aggrandized or removed from people's understanding of their work activities (Carlsen, 2006), even mere fabrications (Goffman 1974). Higher purposes need to be perceived as authentic (Quinn & Thakor, 2018) and have grounding in actual practice.

Tied to such controversies of motivational frames, we might also find a greater emphasis on the notion of project management practice, be it extraordinary or mundane, as a

true craft. Richard Sennett's ideas of *The Craftsmen* fit such a narrative where love and care for one's craft is reinforced in both how the profession is developed and also practiced (Sennett, 2008). Again, such a framing of one's work cannot be taken for granted. A travel through Sennett's classic book provides several stories of how a quest for profit maximization, undergirded by disenchanting performance indicators, disengages those who perform on projects from their *experiences* of performing. Plying one's craft with love and care is an ultimate show of respect to oneself and care for end users (Taylor et al., 2014). There is much research indicating that the framing and connecting that matter the most are the ones that establish how one makes a difference to the human other, whether immediate or more distant beneficiaries (Bolino & Grant, 2018). There is a rich tradition of research on the psychosocial construction of generativity, usually defined as adults' concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations (McAdams et al., 1997; McAdams & Guo, 2015). This is paralleled by growing research on prosocial behavior and the importance of prosocial motivation (Grant & Berry, 2011) as a major strand of individual engagement and identity formation (Bolino & Grant, 2016). This suggests further exploration of how project managers can activate motivation of a prosocial nature to simultaneously build narrative capital and boost performance.

For the headmaster of the high school, the authenticity of the motivational framing of the transformation project was helped by at least three sets of processes. First, his colleagues described him as repeatedly calling them into battle against competing high schools in more advantaged parts of the city, including constantly marking and celebrating progress in competitive indicators such as drop-out rates and applications. Second, a steady stream of new innovation efforts in pedagogy, school activities, and school organizing brought credibility to high aspirations, thus amounting to concrete stepping-stones (Carton, 2018) and achievements that connected to higher aspirations. And third, the craft of caring for the

singular student as an animating master frame was evident in all parts of school activities. This, for example, took the form of schemes for elaborate social onboarding, investment into varied student social activities, greeting conventions (all staff were expected to personally greet any student they met during the day), conflict negotiations (where the headmaster would invariably side with students), as well as practices of emphasizing and celebrating student entrepreneurial projects and student reviews. As a manager remarked after a presentation by the headmaster, "He [the Headmaster] is simply so proud of and emotionally moved by the students in all these activities. Then we are moved too." At the heart of the narrative capital were strong perceptions that the transformation project was authentically for the student other.

## Extending Possibility: Open Projects and New Beginnings

Narrative capital grows with open rather than closed stories. Around 10 years after our headmaster entertained the idea of leaving the hopeless school with a heart attack, the school emerged as the uncontested winner of the annual competition for student applications (an outcome that is critical for allocation of public resources), and also shattered the national record for applications. Upon learning of this, the headmaster recognized a dilemma of having attained a major goal: 'It's a bit like Bob Beamon having made that jump [1968 long jump Olympics in Mexico, a record that would stand for four decades], walking back and forth, staring at the pitch in disbelief, knowing he would never surpass it—what's next?' (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a, p. 92). We understand this statement to mean that the headmaster realized that the battle against rival high schools and the hopes for goal attainment were about to lose their life-enriching functions. In the wake of temporary emptying attainment-hope, a search for sustaining the narrative capital of the school transformation project necessitated the extending of possibilities.

By extending possibility to sustain narrative capital, we mean two sets of things. One is the notion of opening up. Alongside the need for living with purpose and hope for goal attainment, is an at least equally strong need for indeterminacy and openness in people's lives (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009a; McAdams, 1993), including a belief that the future is open ended, fraught with generative possibilities, and can be influenced (Ludema et al., 1997). Striving for goal attainment in itself can be trapping. From a perspective of meaning making, this suggests attention to balancing purpose and openness in singular projects or in a portfolio of projects. Other things being equal, this favors organizations that can engage their employees in a varied set of projects, some set on very specific purposes and deliverables, others representing the glory of the clean sheets and new beginnings.

Extending possibility may also mean a process by which one seeks to replicate some aspect of past successful experience and follow up on the trajectories for development that are opened up or can be inferred from these experiences. This may involve instantiating experiences from past projects as desired exemplars of what could be (Carlsen, 2006). Or we may think along the lines of experiential surfacing (Nilsson, 2015) of episodes from projects that involve particularly notable or desirable experiences for beneficiaries. In this way, sustaining narrative capital involves telling stories of prior innovation projects, so that they work as a generative memory for the next adventures (Garud et al., 2011)—extending entails drawing upon the successful past in reflective and creative use of prior experience to meet evolving desires and purposes (Alexander, 2013).

## Conclusion

We are projects because selves are distributed across contexts of participating in practices that are increasingly organized as projects and because some such participations enter individual and organizational life stories. We are the projects that enlist our imagination,

whether looking back at the stories of what was or the ones that orient our lives in the present of things future. We are the projects that matter not only to ourselves but that also touch the lives of many and enter into larger causes and struggles. Because we are our projects, project managers have unique opportunities to facilitate meaning making that can be powerful for people, projects, and organizations alike. These mechanisms for meaning making are about building narrative capital and are greatly under researched in project management literature.

We have charted three sets of practices for building narrative capital, each with further implications for research and practice. One is inviting people into adventure and sharing outcomes so that people feel they are somehow participants or protagonists in the project story/ies and thus gain psychological ownership. Another is to connect the stories of the project to larger causes and struggles outside of its proximate task-oriented sphere, *and* to the more mundane realities of everyday practice. Such connections, while always questioned for their authenticity and legitimacy, seem particularly important when they involve making a difference for immediate and distant beneficiaries. A third is to continue to keep projects open, balance participation over a portfolio of projects with varied demands of goal orientation and open-endedness and to lift stories from the projects that mattered so that they can represent a generative repertoire of new beginnings, other projects we can become.

Further research will be needed to deepen and nuance these narrative practices. And while we have emphasized narrative capital as a largely positive phenomenon (that may be untrivial to create), we have merely hinted at its potentially negative nature as being either narrowing and trapping (in terms of reflecting stories lacking openness), inauthentic (and thus of little value), or even shaming and a threat to identity: Projects that were once charged with meanings of progress and hope may evolve into being symbols of failure (Van Marrewijk, 2017), and stories of a troubling past may be reiterated to close down possibilities. In this sense, the concept of narrative capital has a clear parallel in research on agency (Cooren,

2018; Välikangas & Carlsen, 2020) as a temporal-relational phenomenon that needs to be explored as ongoing collective *acts* of narration more than reified properties of social affairs. When looking backward, remembering may or may not be done is such a way that action repertoires from the past are located and mobilized. When looking forward, imagination of higher ends and new possibilities may or may not be well enough connected to people's challenges in the everyday.

The overall message for project managers nevertheless seems clear: Cultivating narrative capital means first of all to invite conversations about the stories our projects are producing: What is really at stake? What do we want to achieve? Why and how could this project matter to you, us, and others when looking backward and forward in time? What's our story now?

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