

**Comments on Stephan Manning and Jörg Sydow  
“Transforming Creative Potential in Project Networks“**

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By focusing on networks as in multiple constellations emerging and extremely dynamic social formations, the paper by Manning and Sydow provides inspiring theoretical considerations on, as well as empirical evidence for, ‘new forms of work’ that might generate what the authors coin “network-based control.” On the one hand, the paper connects very well to the enormous body of literature on various types of networks; however, on the other hand, the authors develop a specific perspective on transformation processes in networks in which “creative” potential is turned into effective and powerful practice. These processes are understood as being mediated by the genealogy of social relations that both create and constrain opportunities for collaboration in project networks.

One of the strengths of the paper is that it just briefly conjures up the main representatives in literature on networks and gives way for in-depth insights into the processes of network formation in the TV industries. The authors convincingly position their approach within the network literature in general and the literature on project networks in specific. In meta-theoretical terms, Manning and Sydow primarily refer to structuration theory and network literature. What might come to the reader’s mind is whether a more than only implicit consideration of Bourdieu’s theory of power relations with respect to transformations processes between different forms of (economic, social, cultural, or symbolic) capital could have been helpful to broaden the scope for data interpretation. The explorative, qualitative case study approach taken in empirical research would have – in the very best sense – allowed the authors to take multiple theoretical perspectives on these interesting data.

By focussing on the “transformation problem,” Manning and Sydow convince the reader to connect to discussions lead by labor process theorists as well as to those in management literature. Both from an analytic as well as from an interventionist perspective, the authors’ observation is as evident as it is striking that, “while project management is a rather reflexive activity ... project networks are still reproduced and ‘used’ less consciously”. Therefore, it is only more than consistent that the paper has a strong empirical focus and raises as its core question “how ‘creative work’ projects comes about, against the background of the context in which projects are situated. In particular, the way social relationships ... constrain, yet enable ‘creative project work’ ...”

After setting the theoretical framework the authors report on their empirical research in which they applied a comparative case study approach and re-constructed network formation processes and trajectories of actor constellations found in two different TV projects in the “creative industries.” The qualitative data based on expert interviews that are presented in the paper give evidence that three actors – as I would like to coin it – form the *distributed and dynamic actor kernel* of TV productions networks: producers, channels, and creative actors. Production companies as crucial core actors in TV project networks – in the course of realizing projects (TV productions) in collaboration with channels and creative actors – develop specific forms of reputation (gaining, e.g., “symbolic capital” by winning awards and building “labels” for certain types of TV productions, series, etc.). These projects at the same time and reflexively help to (re-)bind resources both in terms of public attention or expectations, the renewal of contracts with channels, and a continued attractiveness for creative actors that match with and have themselves historically contributed to what I would like to refer to as *historically evolving network paths*.

The very practice of TV productions in project networks over time generates and constitutes what Manning and Sydow label “critical actor constellations,” in which relational

power is continuously reproduced. Though the authors identify broadcasters (i.e., channels) as those who may to a large extent determine formal frame conditions for the realization of projects, they also hold that, especially for creative actors, there exists “a degree of autonomy that goes well beyond ‘responsible autonomy’ in the standard labor process” (whatever the latter may be). As we know from network literature (hybrids between bureaucracy and market), power relations can not be enacted and creative potential may not be unfolded by means of direct influence or pressure: network-based control works much more subtly as it binds options of participating actors to enact power in a reflexive way. The Foucaultian genealogical interpretation of power relations as a reflexive practice of self-discipline might come to the reader’s mind here.

A hypothesis might emerge here that could quite easily connect to the illuminating interpretation put forward by Manning and Sydow: the more certain actors move to the *dynamic actor kernel of a project network*, the more powerful and, at the same time, dependent they become on the reproduction and prolongation of already established social (power) relations. A subsequent hypotheses I would like to add is that the sustainability of a project network would depend on ‘its success in preventing’ single actors from completely ‘occupying the kernel’ in order not to lose the dynamics and flexibility that is based on the short-term actualizations of its latent though constantly re-negotiated potentials which in turn might stabilize actor constellations in the long run.

To put this comment on the very much inspiring paper by Manning and Sydow into further perspective it should be understood that it is made by an organizational psychologist. From this point of view, the paper by Manning and Sydow triggers research questions that relate to issues like trust building in trans-organizational collaboration, the genealogy of social cohesion in networks, the re-invention of implicit ‘psychological contracts’ in and for project networks, the dialectics of power and self-control in dispersed and only weakly coded collaboration spaces, the analysis of different degrees of rigidity within networks, the investigation in options for breaking

network paths, the even greater and paradoxical challenge of establishing new ones, etc. All these questions should give rise to further theoretical debates and empirical research awaiting the cross-fertilization of knowledge gained in sociology, organizational behavior, organizational psychology, and beyond. A debate that might be in need of what Ludwik Fleck coined “exoteric forms of scientific communication” and that is very much appreciated by a psychologist being invited to comment on this impressive paper.