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A project-as-practice perspective on helping behavior and reciprocity in an inter-organizational project

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ABSTRACT

Much research on project management links clear roles and responsibilities stemming from formal job descriptions to successful project performance and processes. However, research on discretionary behavior suggests that individuals' voluntary commitments, which are not part of the contractual tasks, such as giving help, also contribute to organizational success. Drawing on ethnographic data and a practice theoretical perspective, we investigate the role and impact of helping on the social life of an inter-organizational project. We show how actors engaging in acts of helping assume roles of receivers and givers of help. We show that the establishment of these roles prompts behavior on behalf of the actors, which may have an adversarial impact on the contractually defined roles and thus pose central challenges for the rational management of projects. We conclude by arguing that the connection between practice and social life applies to all social practices, which means that project managers should pay close attention to the actualities of project practices.

1. Introduction

Project management research into behavior in projects, while still a relatively new area of concern (Geraldi et al., 2021), has thus far focused primarily on structural characteristics in project organizations. This includes the need for clear roles (Gustavsson & Gohary, 2012) and the necessity for management to define formal role obligations based on the professional and organizational affiliation of an actor. Packendorff (1995) describes this approach using the metaphor of the machine, implying a situation where the purpose of the structuring of an organization's resources is to avoid deviations in the tasks attributed to a given role and ensure the forecasted task execution. In the context of inter-organizational construction projects, the machine metaphor directs attention towards the formalized management of boundaries between different organizations (Bos-de Vos et al., 2019) and their respective obligations. In such projects, there are no mutual contracts between the involved parties. Rather, each part is often contracted independently by the client, meaning that a project manager must define and manage the roles of, and interdependencies between, organizational members to ensure that the project can run smoothly, even in the absence of formal reciprocal obligations between the parties involved.

The low degree of reciprocity and mutual trust, which such project relationships entail, has been found to reduce the resilience of a construction project (He et al., 2022) and hinder communication, cooperation, and the resolution of conflicts. For this reason, emphasis has been placed on fostering cooperative behavior, reciprocity, and mutual dependence (Gil, 2009). In project environments displaying such characteristics, project members are more likely to feel a sense of commitment and loyalty to the organization, leading to increased willingness to engage in discretionary behavior such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Chih et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018), project citizenship behavior (Braun et al., 2012), and helping (Crama et al., 2019; He et al., 2021). Discretionary behavior is not recognized by a formal reward system but has, nevertheless, been found to promote the efficient functioning of an organization (Organ et al., 2012). Discretionary behavior may, however, also take place in organizational contexts where employees are not expected to perform it and no managerial efforts have been made to stimulate this kind of behavior. Rather it may arise from informal social interactions (e.g., Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Agarwal et al., 2021), and accordingly pose a challenge for the reasoning behind the mechanistic understanding of project organization and management.

The mechanistic understanding of project management thus tends to rely on formal hierarchies and channels of communication. In this

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perspective, employee participation and empowerment are seen as risks to the plan and the managerial emphasis on centralized control (Pollack, 2007). As discretionary behavior, in contrast, leverages informal networks to share knowledge, provide support, and facilitate collaboration between project members, it bypasses formal structures when necessary. In addition, inter-organizational projects involve employees from different companies who come together to achieve specific objectives within tight constraints such as limited budgets, resources, and time-lines. In the mechanistic view of project management, clear communication and management of stakeholder expectations are necessary to ensure project success (Verburg et al., 2013; Davis, 2014). Behaviors that deviate from established project plans, such as helping, may create confusion and lead to erosion of support for the project, notwithstanding that discretionary actions may be taken at an operational level to enhance problem-solving or in response to the need for adapting to changing project conditions.

Thus, while helping behavior may play a crucial role in the successful execution of inter-organizational construction projects, it may simultaneously pose a critical challenge to the stability and order of the project, which the mechanistic approach to project management otherwise relies on. Discretionary behavior produces and re-produces reciprocal obligations between project members (Gouldner, 1960; Deckop et al., 2003; Braun et al., 2013) that may potentially give rise to role ambiguity (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2022), overloading (Bolino & Turnley, 2005), and dependency (Comeau & Griffith, 2005), which could negatively impact overall organizational performance. While such issues also have been identified in recent work on discretionary work in project settings (e.g., Yang et al., 2021; Ma & Fu, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023), the insights provided in these studies reflect a tendency in project management studies to give preference to quantitative accounts on the relationship between behavior and performance drawing on surveys using self-referential data.

Braun et al. (2013), have argued that such quantitative approaches impose important restrictions due to the risk of socially desired responses, where respondents may give answers that will be viewed favorably by the later readers of the answers (see also Leiringer & Cardellino, 2008). Moreover, as surveys rely on participants' recollections and interpretations of events this places crucial constraints on the richness of data and accounts produced, including elaborating the tacit, embodied, and taken-for-granted instances and manifestations of helping behavior. In contrast, ethnographic accounts provide insights into what is actually happening (cf. Buchan & Simpson, 2020) in interactions between project members – or into the *actualities* (Cicmil et al., 2006) of helping behavior. On this basis, the aim of our paper is to show how helping behavior produce and re-produce social life (Blomquist et al., 2010; Brunet et al., 2021) within a project and what the implications hereof are for management of projects. In doing so, we draw on and contribute to the strand of project management research that emphasizes the actualities of projects.

This paper begins with an introduction to discretionary behavior drawing specifically on the literature on OCB and helping. We next introduce practice theory as a lens to understand the link between behavior and social life in a project. We then describe our ethnographic data collection method and how we, through a classical grounded theoretical approach, inductively identified helping behavior and reciprocity in our data. In the findings section, we provide empirical illustrations of helping behavior that are used as basis for the discussion of how helping behavior can produce and re-produce reciprocity issues between project members and thus interfere with the social life in the project. This brings us to conclude that both the research community as well as the industry should pay close attention to the potential of the project-as-practice approach as it can add to the understanding of how the social life in the project is becoming due to the situated actions in the project.

2. Discretionary behavior and practice theory

In this section, we present the theoretical concepts we draw on. We emphasize the notion of discretionary behavior drawing on the literature on OCB and helping behavior, before turning our attention to practice theory as a means of studying helping and social life in projects.

2.1. Organizational citizenship and helping as discretionary behavior

OCB can be defined as discretionary behavior that is not recognized by the formal reward system of an organization, but nevertheless promotes the goals of the organization (Organ et al., 2012). Previous research has, nevertheless, argued that OCB may not neglect rewards, rather some rewards may be expected, even though these are not guaranteed by any contract (Braun et al., 2013). OCB has been found to facilitate project success in terms of time, budget, and quality as well as improve long-term relationships (Braun et al., 2013). Citizenship behavior is thus encouraged as the behavior is seen as a means to achieve project success (Shafi et al., 2021) as well as playing a role in creating resilience in projects when unexpected events occur (Morkan et al., 2023). OCB is a result of social exchanges between participants (Lim et al., 2017), with fair processes encouraging the performance of citizenship behavior (Shafi et al., 2021). Furthermore, OCB can be motivated by the project itself. Yang et al. (2020) e.g., found that citizenship behavior in megaprojects seems to be driven by social values, and Dainty et al. (2005) illustrated how the construction of a cancer research facility caused the operatives to perform OCB due to the end-use of the project.

Indications of over thirty different dimensions of OCB were found in a review on the subject (Podsakoff et al., 2014). Among the dimensions identified, Walz and Niehoff (1996) mention helping, compliance, sportsmanship, courtesy, and altruism. In this paper, we investigate helping behavior, which often play a prominent role in studies that theorize OCB on an interpersonal level (Koopman et al., 2016). Helping has been defined as the voluntary actions that individuals take to help others with, or prevent, the occurrence of work-related problems (Organ et al., 2005). Braun et al. (2013) argue that helping behavior is a context-sensitive concept and find that helping behavior in a project organization is directed towards co-workers in problem-solving situations. Helping can thus be considered as a type of discretionary behavior, which is directed towards an individual, rather than an organization, and thus only indirectly benefits the organization (Williams & Anderson, 1991).

Helping behavior can establish a degree of reciprocity, which entails that people should help those who have helped them and not injure those who have helped them (Gouldner, 1960). Helping behavior, and the associated element of reciprocity, has important stabilizing consequences for social systems, including projects, and may contribute to improved group performance if a virtuous cycle of helping can be created and sustained (Liu & Fellows, 2009). On, the other hand, if individuals do not receive help when requested a vicious cycle leading to a decrement of performance can emerge (Dunlop & Lee, 2004). Fu et al. (2021) found that giving and receiving help did not influence individuals' performance, nevertheless, we suggest that helping behavior is connected to the notion of opportunity costs, which Atkinson et al. (2007), (p. 643) define as *"the value sacrificed when the factor of production is used for a specific purpose."* Opportunity costs address the implicit costs of production resources, meaning that only production resources not allocated to production activities, and thus have surplus capacity, have zero opportunity cost. Consequently, actors performing OCB or engage in helping are unable to perform their planned tasks while giving the help, meaning that their organizations incur opportunity costs as their employees are not doing the planned tasks at the given moment.

2.2. Organizational citizenship behavior and helping in projects

OCB has been identified in project organizations (Braun et al., 2013), inter-organizational projects (Gerke et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2017) as well as in megaprojects (Morkan et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2017 and Yang et al., 2020). Morkan et al. (2023) include the influence of citizenship behavior on external stakeholders and thus suggest focusing on the behavior of a broader group of stakeholders than immediate project members. This illustrates the relevance of considering the boundary conditions under which OCB and helping behavior are performed. Focusing on boundary conditions entails examining the factors that influence when, where, and why a given behavior occurs within an organization. In the context of helping, Podsakoff et al. (2014) e.g., argue how task characteristics should be regarded as a boundary condition that may encourage the performance of helping and increase organizational effectiveness, while organizational characteristics, on the other hand, may serve as boundary conditions that diminish the performance of helping behavior and reduce the effect of helping behavior on organizational effectiveness.

Focusing on task characteristics is particularly relevant in a project setting. According to Lundin and Söderholm (1995), project organizations are established to, and characterized by having, focus on the task. Different types of project organizations, however, have different characteristics. Here we will focus on the interorganizational project. In an inter-organizational project, the completion of the task is not the sole responsibility of a single organization, rather several organizations must work together to complete the task, which means that project members should reframe their behavior to perform for the project rather than their parent organization (Sydow & Braun, 2018).

The organizational characteristics of the inter-organizational project organization do, however, not encourage reframing behavior towards helping project members from other organizations than one's own. This argument can be illustrated by drawing on the previously introduced concept of opportunity costs. Theoretically, when managers in an inter-organizational project decide to let their employees help another organization, the employees are no longer working for their parent organization. Essentially, the employees are diverting their time and energy away from the parent organization's activities. The employees may be working for the other organization or the project, but the parent organization will always incur opportunity costs as the helping behavior is not directed towards the tasks the parent organization is contractually bound to execute. In certain instances, the parent organization may already be incurring opportunity costs if it has not attributed any tasks to the employees.

Consequently, it is never trivial when helping behavior crosses organizational boundaries. The boundary conditions of the inter-organizational project, specifically the organizational characteristics, can thus be argued to discourage the performance of helping behavior although helping behavior has been found to assist in problem solving.

2.3. Practice theory as lens for studying helping and social life in projects

The present study addresses an inter-organizational project organization as the setting for helping behavior. However, rather than linking helping behavior to the performance of the inter-organizational project, our focus is on how it produces and re-produces a hidden mechanism in the form of reciprocal relationships between the organizations involved in the project, and thus influences the social life of the inter-organizational project. To this end, we apply a practice theoretical approach to social reality, which is well-suited to address how behavior is producing and re-producing the social life (Orlikowski, 2010; Schatzki, 2016) or the here-and-now reality of the project organization.

In contrast to functional and positivist approaches to understanding social life, practice theory does not allow for clear definitions of practices (Nicolini, 2013). Practice theorists will also not attempt to generate clear boundaries between practices to distinguish one practice from another practice (Nicolini, 2013) as the purpose of a practice-based investigation is to explain organizational matters rather than registering practices (Gherardi, 2012). Within the practice theoretical paradigm, it is assumed that it is practice, which allows the performers of practice to justify their actions, and practice thus enables the performers to think of themselves in a certain manner (Nicolini, 2013). As an example, the sending of a mail can both be part of an organizational practice (inviting people to a design meeting) or part of a communication practice (replying to a suggestion). In both cases, it is the practice, which gives the action meaning and enables other practitioners to recognize the practice behind the action. Consequently, a practice can be identified by the meaning the performers attribute to it (Nicolini, 2013). We argue that helping behavior can be considered as a practice insofar as the giver or receiver of help considers the behavior to be helping when they are performing the actions. Boyd (2013) sums up the aspect of attributing meaning by addressing how all discussions of practice are inadequate, whereas placing practice centrally will allow for relevant discussions about the connections between practice and social reality.

A main assumption within practice theory is that practices can shape social reality (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, 2016). The assumption of a connection between actions and social reality is also known from process studies (Brunet et al., 2021; Sergi et al., 2020). Social reality is complex and can be in a stage of continuity and change simultaneously, as different practices produce and re-produce different aspects of social reality (Hui et al., 2017; Schatzki, 2016). Consequently, practice theory allows for an understanding of how social reality is produced and re-produced by identifying specific practices and investigating the potential consequences of these practices on social life. Within project-as-practice research, Hoorn and Whitty (2017) have demonstrated how small mundane acts like congratulating project members on their birthday can produce a social reality that encourages engagement in the project, and Willems et al. (2020) have shown how some practices produce an organizational reality where the project members have a level of autonomy from their parent organization. Indeed, a focus on practices can encourage reflections in the present on the potential consequences of actions (Sergi, 2012), rather than focusing on post-actions (Kremser & Sydow, 2022)

In this research, we do not intend to define a practice of helping. Rather, we set out to investigate how helping behavior shapes social life in an inter-organizational project. We begin our investigation by identifying situations where individuals can be observed to be thinking of themselves as a giver or receiver of help, as this self-belief is a sign of helping practice giving meaning to the performed actions. Once helping practice has been identified, we discuss the potential impact the practice can have on the social life in the inter-organizational project.

3. Methods and research approach

The research conducted is based on an inductive, grounded theoretical approach, which draws together practice-based contributions to the study of discretionary behavior in an inter-organizational construction project.

3.1. Research context

Empirically, the study draws on data from a nine-month ethnographic case-study on coordination and social behavior in a refurbishment project involving the demolition and upgrading of dwellings for a Danish housing association. The project was divided into four main contracts: demolition, concrete, carpentry, and electrical installations and plumbing. Three of the contracts were each managed by a single organization who had appointed their own contract manager. The last contract, installations, was executed by two different organizations who collaborated to fulfill the obligations but had appointed each their contract manager: one for the electrical installations and one for the plumbing. In addition, the client had appointed a site manager being

responsible for the overall project management activities. Theoretically, each of the five contract managers can be considered to perform roles (cf. Turnley et al., 2003) associated with their respective contracts while the site manager performs the role of principal towards the contractors.

The project, and hence the different contractors, was contractually governed according to the stipulations in the Danish standard contractual basis "General conditions for the provision of works and supplies within building and engineering", also called GC92 (Ministry of Housing, 1992). This is an agreed document that is often used with only slight moderations for each specific project. Consequently, the contract manager's role is defined by the general requirements outlined in GC92. Importantly for our study, GC92 specifies the clients and contractors' tasks and obligations, including how tasks (and disputes) related to so-called extra work are to be handled. Extra work is tasks, which for some reason have not been specified in the contract, but still need to be performed to conclude the project. GC92 thus anticipates mistakes in the tender material and unexpected situations by giving the contractor the right to perform extra work. A client can demand extra work to be executed if it has a natural relation to the agreed work. Likewise, a contractor who oversees the related work has the legal right to execute the extra work. In addition, a contractor may have the right to carry out extra work without involving the client, if this is done to avoid the client suffering a loss. The cost of the extra work will often be determined at the time when the parties sign the contract.

Payment for extra work is often complicated as it may involve an increase in payment for the contractor and, at the same time, a reduction in payment if some tasks will not be performed as otherwise agreed to when the contract was signed. Extra work thus often requires elaborate negotiations between the client and the contract manager. A clause in the contract, however, secures that the negotiations do not affect the overall deadline of the project. The reason for this is that the contractor is required to begin the work before the negotiations of price are finished (Ministry of Housing, 1992). In this context, the concept of opportunity costs plays a key role as a contractor can incur opportunity costs for performed work if the client does not agree that the completed work is extra work. Only if the organizations perform work, which is deemed to be extra work, will they receive payment in accordance with the previously agreed set-piece prices.

We chose this project as the research context for our ethnographic study projects, as the approach to project management on the project was based on a rational and mechanistic approach to management, as reflected in the contractual system, which created clear boundaries between the organizations involved. The project thus represents a complicated and interesting setting for studying discretionary behavior crossing organizational boundaries.

3.2. Data collection

Data was collected through an ethnographic study, as a focus on situated action is central to theory development within practice theory (Svejvig, 2021). Ethnography allows for a focus on local contexts and practices and has been highlighted as a relevant approach for generating new insights within the context of the construction industry (Pink et al., 2014).

The method used to collect data was shadowing. Shadowing has been described as fieldwork on the move, which makes it possible for the researcher to follow (or be a shadow of) an actor (Czarniawska, 2013). The actor, which was shadowed, oversaw the carpentry contractor and several sub-contractors performing work like roofing, painting, and cleaning. The contract manager was shadowed by the first author for a duration of forty-three different days, a combined 280 h, spanning a period from late November 2019 to September 2020. In this period, the building site was affected by COVID-19 restrictions and the ethnographic study was consequently interrupted. Access to the site had been negotiated through this contract manager's organization that moreover obtained the client's permission for the researcher's presence on-site.

Moreover, the site management informed all participants on-site of the researcher's presence, and a poster in the meeting hut explained her presence on-site. In the present study, the shadowing ethnographer was not participating actively in the action, although she was fully visible to the practitioners. This approach allowed her to be present and follow the contract manager's working practice on the building site.

During the ethnographic study, the researcher had access to a desk on the building site, where she worked to become part of the social life on the building site. The desk was placed in the same site hut, where the contract manager had his office. At times, she was present on-site when the contract manager was not. The ethnographer shadowed the observed contract manager in his day-to-day work on the building site, with the researcher following the contract manager as much as possible. She also followed him on a single visit to another site and when they went shopping for workwear. We also observed interactions between the different site agents at 31 formal meetings. This included health and safety meetings, site meetings, and progress meetings. To contextualize what took place at the meetings, and what the meetings accomplished, observations were made in advance of the meetings, as different project members prepared, and after the meetings to see how they reflected on the negotiation and dialog that took place.

To document the observations and create an inventory of events, the researcher made field notes in a little notebook in front of the participants of the events. The ethnographer later transferred the field notes into Word documents, describing the observed events in detail. Researchers can consider respondent validation of their descriptions to ensure that the events are described in a manner so the observed can recognize them. This is, however, a contested method as the participants act as filters between the situation and the reporting of the situation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). In the present research, the ethnographer presented the observed contract manager with descriptions of ethical issues, although he was not asked to validate the data.

Shadowing and taking notes in the open are not without problems. Issues related to researcher participation, visibility, and the potential consequence for the observed individuals' behavior need to be addressed (Czarniawska, 2013; Klitgaard et al., 2021; Mäki & Kerosuo 2015; Oswald & Dainty, 2020). Potential subjectivity problems may arise when an ethnographer acts in a combined role as ethnographer and consultant (van Marrewijk & van Ende, 2022), and a similar subjectivity problem may arise with shadowing, as the ethnographer and the shadowed spend a considerable amount of time together. Consequently, shadowing, as any other ethnographic method, requires high levels of reflexivity from the ethnographer (Czarniawska, 2013). At the same time, reflexivity should never become systemized to fulfill what Alvesson et al. (2008), p. 498) refer to as ceremonial purposes of legitimation.

Ethnographic accounts are not a mirror of reality, although an account can constitute the account as real (Emerson et al., 2011). Indeed, ethnographic accounts should be treated with care as the ethnographer will act as a filter between the observed and the reported (Emerson et al., 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). The concepts of reliability and validity thus become central to the credibility of the research (Silverman, 2014). To address these concepts, researchers need to focus on the case, they are investigating. Lund (2014) reminds us that it is always the researchers, who construct the case under investigation. Researchers should deal with reliability concerns by consistently reflecting on how they analyze and present the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

3.3. Data analysis

A grounded theorizing approach was used to analyze and discover patterns in the collected data. Grounded theory is well-suited for understanding practitioners' ways of working, acting, and deciding (Koch et al., 2019). Using grounded theory makes it possible to identify patterns in data and organize and relate concepts in accordance with the pattern (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Different grounded theoretical

approaches exist. The use of theoretical codes and the coding process described by Glaser (1998) differs from the grounded theory approach using axial coding as described in Strauss and Corbin (1990)). The former, which we draw on, focusses on the notion of so-called theoretical codes, or coding families, that are used to identify and define patterns in the data (Glaser, 1978, 2001; Holton & Walsh, 2017; Walsh et al., 2020). Familiarity with coding families is essential as it enables the analyst to recognize a theoretical code (Glaser, 1978; 1998; 2001), which can explain the observed behavior and social processes. In the present study, this analytical process was conducted in three main stages as elaborated below: (1) data transformation and exploration, (2) theoretical modeling, and 3) application of theoretical code.

3.3.1. Stage 1: data transformation and exploration

The classical grounded theory coding process involves transferring all data into text, line-by-line coding, memo writing, and memo sorting (Glaser, 1998). Memos capture emergent ideas during line-by-line coding, and sorting involves comparing categories based on memos with actual data. This iterative process continues until a meaningful theoretical code is discovered.

In this study, the coding process commenced post-data collection. The analyst read all entries from the field notes and used gerunds for the line-by-line coding, forcing a focus on behavior. This, in other words, entailed converting raw data (observations and informal talks) into a textual format for further analysis. On this basis, memos were written to capture emerging ideas from this process. The memos were then read and sorted according to three recurring substantive codes that were identified: helping, obligations, and roles. These substantive codes conceptualized the empirical substance of the area of research (Glaser, 1978). Mac Donald et al., (2020) emphasize how the categories or codes that emerges during a grounded theoretical approach to data may be influenced by the analyst's bias. We have limited this potential risk by comparing and discussing interpretations to identify and resolve discrepancies leading to more robust findings. We have also applied reflexivity (cf. Emerson et al., 2011; Klitgaard et al., 2021; Oswald & Dainty, 2020) in trying to maintain awareness of own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions and how these might influence our findings.

3.3.2. Stage 2: theoretical modelling

In the second stage, various attempts were made to fit the observed data into models from different theoretical coding families, which could include most of the observations. In doing so, we tested various coding families to see if they could account for the observed behavior and social processes. Coding families are defined by Vollstedt and Rezat (2019) as sets of general sociological concepts organized into loosely connected frameworks that enable the researcher to develop theory. Coding families contain different theoretical codes that help conceptualize how the substantive codes relate to each other and can be explained in an interrelated fashion (Glaser, 1978). To provide an example, the so-called *cultural family* contains codes on social norms, values, beliefs, etc., whereas the *process family* contains theoretical codes, such as stage, phase, progression, etc. that according to Hernandez (2009: 53) often are "*explicit and easily identified by researchers when study participants talk about changing over time or about going through stages, phases or transitions.*"

We used different coding families in the second stage in an iterative process. First, we attempted to fit the observed data into a model of codes from the process family as there were several indications of a sequential order in the data. In Section 4.2, we e.g., present an observed incident of helping behavior, where the site management receives help when they are offered the use of a machine and its operator for free when a new site layout is needed. Accordingly, there is a phase before the offer of help and a phase after the offer of help. While the process family codes were useful in explaining behavior in helping situations as a process, it did not encompass the type of task performed, and was therefore not suited to account for a connection to the task as a boundary condition of the inter-organizational project.

In a second round of analysis, the theoretical coding families were revised (cf. Glaser, 1978, Glaser, 1998) and we attempted to fit data according to concepts belonging to the *role family*. This change of focus was prompted by observations of substantial concepts such as the roles of *giver* and *receiver* in the data. An example is how a project manager is a role (cf. Cowen & Hodgson, 2015) that is performed between two persons of different social status, with the project manager having a higher (formal, hierarchical) status than the subordinate site agent. According to this theoretical family code, the site manager from the above example who borrowed the machine would become the receiver of help, while the contract manager, who offered their services would be the giver of help. While concepts in the role family consider the link between helping behavior and the formal organization of the inter-organizational project, we found that it lacked explanatory power to account for the how the project's task characteristics influenced the observed helping behavior.

Accordingly, we engaged in a third round of modelling, applying theoretical codes from the *dimension family* (Glaser, 1978). This coding family allowed us to explain the substantive codes with reference to the relation between a whole and its elements, such as segments, facets, slices, etc. (Kelle, 2007). This approach allowed for a focus on whether or not the observed incidents were governed by the contractual framework as well as a focus on the roles of giver or receiver of help. This meant that the task as a boundary condition of the inter-organizational project could be considered part of the dimension model. In our coding, the elements we identified were two main segments or types of activity that could account for the relationship between the three substantive codes we identified: helping, obligations, and roles. As illustrated in Table 1, these were 1) activities conducted in fulfillment of contractual obligations, and 2) other activities.

As the study was ethnographic and the researcher spend many hours on-site, many different entries were made in the field notes – also to some activities that do not have an immediate connection to the topic in the paper. We have, however, included these observations below to demonstrate, how we could categorize all observations based on the two segments, as well as to demonstrate the different nature of the observations in the data.

3.3.3. Stage 3: application of theoretical code

During the third round of theoretical modelling, it became clear that different work segments played a prominent role in explaining how helping behavior took place on site. Some of these work segments, agreed work and extra work, have been institutionalized in the agreed documents that form the basis of the contractual arrangements. In the agreed documents, extra work is defined allowing the parties to deal with some types of unexpected event within the contract. There are,

Table 1
The segments of work after the first sorting of memos.

Types of activity	Examples of activities
Activities conducted in fulfillment of contractual obligations	Doing inspections on-site Focusing on health and safety Following up on progress in ICT tools Evaluating time schedules Attending meetings Evaluating cost use Preparing documentations Answering mails Dealing with unexpected events Etc.
Other activities	Dealing with unexpected events Helping subcontractor Small talking with other contract managers on-site Eating lunch Buying a coffee machine and printing paper

however, also situations where the handling of unexpected events is not covered by the contract but, nevertheless, is accomplished to ensure the project's progress. In lack of better, we refer to this as *non-contract work*. Table 2 categorizes observation into three theoretical codes each representing a segment of work: agreed work, extra work, and non-contract work. Furthermore, specific empirical illustrations, that will be presented in the findings are indicated.

In the findings to come, we present examples of helping behavior in these segments of work. In Section 4.2, we deal with helping behavior in the agreed work segment, before dealing with extra work in Section 4.3, and non-contract work in Section 4.4.

4. Findings

We will now present empirical illustrations from the ethnographic study. The first illustration is an incident, which demonstrates how the observed contract manager is very aware of which contractual segment a task belongs to. This is followed by three sections each detailing helping behavior in relation to the three different segments of work.

4.1. The different segments of work on-site

The observed contract manager considers his part of the overall project as a separate project with its own budget and decision structure. The contract defines the scope of the contract manager's project as specified in the tender material, including the allocated time and the duration of the different tasks within this scope. The tender material formed the basis for the calculation of the expected costs for the contract manager's organization. After the organization won the tender, a contract negotiation period began, and the parties agreed upon a final price for the work. The contract manager thus entered the building site with a locked iron triangle (Pollack et al., 2018) with defined scope, duration, and use of resources. It is this originally agreed scope of work, as defined by the formal contractual mechanism, which constitutes the segment of agreed work. In this first incident, the ethnographer observed the contract manager as he was putting considerable effort into determining whether a task was included in the originally agreed work or was

Table 2
The final categories of segments of work.

Types of activity	Theoretical codes	Examples of activities
Activities directly linked to the project via the contract	Agreed work	Doing inspections on-site
		Focusing on health and safety
		Following up on progress in ICT tools
		Evaluating time schedules
		Attending meetings
		Evaluating cost use
		Preparing documentations
		Answering mails
		Changing the work rhythm on-site
	Extra work	Dealing with unexpected events covered by extra work clause:
		- Removing lumps from the concrete floor
Other activities	Non-contract work	Dealing with unexpected events not covered by the contract:
		- Allowing another organization to borrow a machine
		- Removing wrongly placed paving slabs
		- Obtaining extra workforce for the site
	Other	Small talking with other contract managers on-site
		Attending lunch
		Buying a coffee machine and printing paper

governed by a clause about extra work:

We are in the office. The contract manager and the intern are present, disputing whether the contract manager's contract includes the installation of some doors in a basement. The contract manager looks at the tender list, which is in printed form in front of him. The intern is looking for the printed drawings from the tender material. The contract manager sits at his desk while the intern is standing up and leaning over the contract manager. They compare the updated drawings on the computer with the tender material that is available in print. Looking at the specifications, they turn their attention back to the printed drawings trying to locate the plan drawings. They need the drawing for the basement as well as a section through the basement. They agree with each other that they cannot find the doors on the section in question and look at another section. After deliberating, they reach the agreement that they cannot clearly identify the doors on any of the drawings, which may explain why the tasks of installing the doors have not been included in their original calculations of the resource use on the project. As their calculations do not include the doors, and they determine this to be a mistake in the tender material, they decide not to do the work and agree that the task of installation of the doors falls into the category of extra work.

This incident shows how the contract manager attempts to determine whether he and his crew are contractually bound to perform a task. While the client expects the doors to be part of the original contract, the contract manager considers them to be extra work. This means that negotiations will begin as to whether the contract manager will receive extra payment from the client, or whether he should have had the doors included in the original bill of quantities in which case the price of the doors is part of the agreed final price. The example highlights the importance of knowing the different segments of work – and that this is a concern that is very much part of the project actualities for the project members.

4.2. Helping behavior and agreed work

As stated above, the contract regulates activities within the agreed work segment. This may explain why helping behavior would not be expected in the agreed work segment. Nevertheless, the ethnographer observed helping behavior in this segment as the next empirical illustration demonstrates. The incident shows how helping can take place between organizations that are not contractually bound to each other. The incident in question took place at a meeting and referred to an earlier incident:

A meeting between all contract managers and the site management is taking place. A conversation about the production flow commences. The observed contract manager addresses the use of a Gantt diagram to illustrate the available duration for each task. He prefers location-based scheduling, as it provides a more precise overview of when, and in which specific apartments, the different work gangs are supposed to perform their tasks. The observed contract manager has experienced that his men were ready to enter a dwelling to perform their tasks but were unable to start work due to mess in the dwelling. This happened as the gang performing the preceding tasks worked in several dwellings at the same time and decided to leave the final tidying-up until work was finished in all the dwellings. This is a procedure, which is in accordance with the contract if they have completed their tasks and have left all dwellings before their deadline. However, the contract manager wishes to enter the dwellings as soon as possible and requests that the other contractors clear the apartments one-by-one as soon as they have finished their work to speed up the process, so the working space can be handed over to the next gang. The other contract managers have previously agreed to change the schedule and production flow in the future, as it will reduce the project's overall duration if they can work on multiple locations within the project at the same time. The contract managers are all satisfied with the location-based approach to planning and decide to continue this way.

In the incident, the contract managers refer to a previous incident, where the contract managers responded positively to the request to change the flow and deadlines on-site. The other contract managers provided the help and accordingly had to change their planned rhythm and instruct their gangs to perform their tasks in a different sequence than originally intended. No formal contract exists between the contract managers, meaning that they had no obligations to respond positively to the request, which may be inconvenient for them. Although the contract regulates this segment of work, helping behavior is, nevertheless, present within the agreed work segment.

4.3. Helping behavior and extra work

In the following incident, we observe helping behavior between an organization and the project management in a situation where a contractually governed relationship between them exists in the helping situation. As the observed contract manager considered the incident to belong in the extra work segment, we have categorized it as such:

> *The contract manager prepares for yet another meeting about costs. He has issued bills for extra work; however, the site management has not approved the bills as extra work. Previously, as part of their agreed work, the carpenters had to install a damp-proof membrane on top of a concrete layer, which however had lumps that could penetrate the membrane and ruin its performance. While it is the concrete contractor's responsibility to ensure that the concrete layer does not have any lumps, the carpenters, nevertheless chose to remove the lumps to ensure progress on-site. Removing the lumps themselves, enabled the carpenters to proceed with their own work on the flooring. The site management will, however, not approve this activity as extra work. Annoyed, the contract manager exclaims: "In the future, the procedure will be that they [the carpenters] just sit in the shed and bill their hours instead of fixing the problem."*

In the incident, the carpenters faced a problem with lumps of concrete on the floor, which meant that they could not progress with their work. The carpenters performed helping behavior to ensure progress on-site by choosing to remove the concrete lumps, so they could continue with the task without delay. However, the site management does not accept that the carpenters receive payment for this activity, as it is covered contractually in their agreement with the concrete contractor who should have finished the floor to a certain standard, allowing the carpenters to proceed with their work. Consequently, the site management does not define the removal of concrete lumps as extra work. They could ask the concrete contractor to fix the standard of the floor without extra costs, although this will cause a further delay in the progress of the project. The carpentry organization will not receive payment for the removal of the lump and as the carpenters still need to receive payment, the carpentry organization is incurring opportunity costs.

The frustration of the carpentry contract manager is clear. In the future, he will only complete tasks, which the contract requires him to do. The contractual framework does not require the carpentry contractor to ask his gang to spend their time productively removing the lumps – they can also spend it unproductively by waiting to become able to proceed with their work. Waiting is seen as an unproductive activity, but the contract manager can nevertheless bill the client for this activity as the carpenters could not begin with their task when the concrete layer did not match the quality specified in the tender material. The bill will then cover the carpentry organization's opportunity costs while they are unproductive. The contract manager might not be successful in this claim for unproductive waiting.

This incident is an example, where there is no reciprocal acknowledgment for the given help, meaning that the giver of help may not perform helping behavior in the future. Furthermore, the incident demonstrates how helping behavior can influence future behavior. The lack of adherence to the role of receiver of help by site management produces and re-produces an unwillingness to perform future helping behavior in the project. We have included the incident to demonstrate

the immediate frustrations over the situation. The ethnographer needs to stress that it remains unclear what would happen in a comparable situation in the future as such a situation did not occur again while she observed the contract manager.

4.4. Helping behavior and non-contract work

Now, we will present illustrations of how helping behavior occurs in the non-contract work segment. The first incident involves a request for help being made and a clear response is given. The help is not part of the agreed work, nor does it relate to extra work. The helping behavior occurs between the client's representative (the site management) and the contract manager where a contractual relationship between the two actors exists in the helping situation.

> *We are at a meeting where the building site layout is the topic of the discussion. The site layout needs to change as the project is reaching another stage. The site management and the contract managers discuss the situation. It will be expensive to make the necessary changes to the site layout, but everyone agrees that it is a good idea. The work involved in the proposed changes will arguably be easier if one contractor is permitted to borrow a telescopic handler (a machine for lifting and transporting goods) from one of the other contractors. This solution is quickly agreed upon with the remark: "[site management] has been quick [to complete their task], so let's celebrate it by letting you use the machine for a while."*

In this incident, the contract managers agree that the site layout no longer is appropriate. It is an unexpected event, which has a potential impact on the progress on-site. However, the contractual basis for the project does not include this change in layout, so the contract does not cover the additional resources needed. The performance of helping behavior ensures project progression. It is a bit unclear, who first expresses the request for help, but the response and the reciprocal element of the response is very clear. The site management can use the machine for non-contract work. The costs for the contract manager will be wear and tear of the machine but also opportunity costs as the machine cannot be used for agreed work in the time when it is used for non-contract work. However, the contract manager is willing to incur these costs as the site manager has been quick at doing a task, which was important for the contract manager. The contract manager is thus willing to absorb the cost in return. While the contract manager is acting in the role of a receiver of help when he enters the meeting, he is given the possibility to act as the giver of help when he offers the use of the machine to the site management. This is behavior aligned with Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity and an example of how the role performance as giver or receiver of help can impact on the progression of the project.

The following incident presents another instance of helping behavior in the non-contract work segment. This incident also takes place between the client's representative (the site management) and the contract manager, which means that a contractual relationship exists between the two actors in the helping situation:

> *The project is still delayed, as the newly constructed garden sheds need to be modified. The carpenters are the next gang to work on the sheds, and their contract manager has detected from the site manager that they are in a hurry to have the work done. He has therefore called in an extra worker from another building site. However, it turns out that the residents already have begun to use the sheds, storing garden equipment, and have failed to move their belongings from the sheds in time for the work to commence. As a result, the site management stops all activities on the sheds. The contract manager is annoyed by this decision and shares his frustrations with his foreman standing on the stairs to the office shed. The contract manager is so annoyed that he says "This time I will also bill our time" – referring to both the carpenters' time and the time he and his foreman has spent on finding the extra workforce.*

The contract manager is performing helping behavior when he reacts to a request for a speedy solution to a problem. The unexpected event is

the delay in getting the garden sheds finished. The contract manager has found extra workforce and is ready to help the site management with the problem. However, the contract manager's efforts to coordinate with managers from other sites to secure the extra workforce on-site seem to be in vain. The contract manager's immediate response to the lack of acknowledgment of his role performance as a giver of help is a demand for payment. His-efforts will then shift from being helping behavior to paid behavior. Originally, the contract manager's coordination work was non-contract work (helping), for which he will not receive payment, and his organization moreover incurs opportunity costs as the contract manager could have been working on something else.

The incident demonstrates how the contract manager expects a certain behavior from the receiver of help due to the norm of reciprocity. The role performance of the site management is inadequate in the contract manager's view. They should not have rushed the task when they were not prepared to receive the help. Consequently, a disruption in the social order may occur if the receiving party does not appreciate or acknowledge the help. Therefore, the reciprocal relationship between giver and receiver becomes challenged. This demonstrates the vulnerability of relying on helping behavior to cope with emerging problems on-site. We have included the incident to demonstrate the immediate effect and frustration of the giver of help if the receiver of help does not receive the help. Whether the contract manager did bill his scheduling expenses is unknown.

The final example illustrates how actors perform helping behavior to complete tasks despite not being contractually bound to do so. The helping behavior plays out between two organizations, which are not contractually bound to each other, as the observed contract manager indirectly helps the other main contractor by getting his men to perform the work:

> A sub-contractor turns up in the office. He is supposed to burn roofing felt on-site but cannot do so as another crew has placed a row of paving slabs in his work area. The sub-contractor asks the contract manager for a solution. The contract manager gets up and takes a walk with his sub-contractor to inspect the situation. As we reach the specific place of work, the contract manager comments that it is one of the other main contractors' employees, who is responsible for placing the slabs in the wrong place. He also comments, however, that he is aware that this contractor is very busy, and so will have some men from his crew remove the slabs.

The example illustrates the occurrence of an unexpected event preventing progress on site. As in the previous example, helping behavior ensures progress. The contract manager promptly helps his sub-contractor by having his crew fix the problem immediately. In this situation, the removal of the slabs is non-contract work. The contract manager will not be able to demand payment for the time used by his crew to remove the slabs, nor for the time he has used on assessing the situation, as the contract manager never gave the other contract manager the possibility of moving the slabs. Furthermore, both the contract manager and his crew could have done something else, meaning that the contract manager's organization incurs opportunity costs. The contract manager is performing the role of the giver of help.

5. Discussion

The empirical illustrations provided have shown the role of helping behavior in facilitating and ensuring the progression of a project. Moreover, practice theory allowed us to consider helping behavior as a social practice, which produces and re-produces a hidden mechanism (cf. Blomquist et al., 2010) regulating behavior in a project in the form of expectations of performances of roles aligned with the status of receiver or giver of help. While we cannot quantifiably evaluate the impact of the expectation of role performance, we find that some impact has been demonstrated. Our ethnographic data collection method made our findings possible due to the ethnographer's presence during the

situations, where actors offered and received help, enabling observations of the immediate reactions in the helping situations.

5.1. Contributions to the study of behavior in projects

The discussion will address two theoretical contributions. First, we argue that the presence of helping behavior in inter-organizational projects implies that the mechanistic view of project management is inadequate, as actors are performing certain behaviors that do not align with the planned behavior. The various organizations demonstrate a willingness to help each other and deviate from the established plans, despite the potential risk of delaying their activities and the associated risk of incurring opportunity costs. Second, the identification of helping behavior, in conjunction with the theoretical insights from social practice theory, draws attention to the existence of a hidden mechanism, which necessitates that actors align their behavior with their status as either receivers or givers of help. The second contribution thus highlights the type of contribution that a project-as-practice approach can generate.

5.1.1. How helping happens and challenges the rationality of project management

We have empirically illustrated that helping behavior happens within an inter-organizational project, including in segments of work, where the contract is not governing behavior. We use the term *happens* intentionally, in much the same way as March (1991) in his analysis of decision making in organizations. Refraining from the idea that helping reflects an intendedly rational choice, we see it more as a practice that does not necessarily fulfill a functional purpose but has a strong symbolic aspect to it. The result of helping behavior is, nevertheless, that it fundamentally influences the relationship between actors with important managerial repercussions for the social reality of the project.

We have shown that helping behavior can be considered to be discretionary behavior, as the contract does not guarantee the performer of help a reward, although some reward may be expected by the performer (Braun et al., 2013). However, we have also illustrated that there exists an expectation of reciprocal behavior on the part of the receiver of help. Actors could potentially perceive the future promise of help, as mandated by the norm of reciprocity, as a reward. Consequently, the performance of helping behavior becomes highly sensible to reciprocity, and reciprocity, in turn, influences actions (Swärd, 2016). Hällström et al. (2021) e.g., discovered that the influence of informal ties between actors can impact actors' perceptions of other actors' roles and responsibilities and influence the activities in the project. However, it is challenging to determine which roles are performed by actors. In their work, Klitgaard et al. (2021) uncovered how actors might engage in impression management to present the most agreeable version of themselves when they sense an audience being present. Similarly, a receiver of help may engage in impression management to align their performance with their status as a receiver of help in front of other actors. This may occur even if the giver of help is not present, as observers of the receiver's actions can report back to the giver of help.

Previous research into discretionary behavior in inter-organizational projects has concentrated on how actors are contractually bound to each other and the implications this may have on actions. This is evidenced by Loosemore and Lim's (2021) work on the relationship between principal and sub-contractor, Lim et al. (2017) work on the importance of inter-organizational justice among members in the inter-organizational project, and the growing body of knowledge concerning OCB in megaprojects where some focus is directed towards the projects members' contract to the project itself due to its significance for the community (Yang et al., 2020). Our study, however, also shows that discretionary behavior has implications for the management of interorganizational projects. Van Offenbeek and Vos (2016) argue that reciprocal dependencies are the most complex dependencies to manage, requiring mutual adjustments and compromises and thus a more pragmatic

approach to project management than else found in the literature that assumes a mechanistic view of project management. This becomes even more relevant in context of helping as a particular type of discretionary behavior. As we see helping as a hidden mechanism that emerges out of the interplay between relational and contractual elements (see also Benítez-Ávila et al., 2019) with each their characteristics, the importance of focusing on the social reality of the project, and hence applying a practice-based perspective, becomes even more important. This is further discussed below.

5.1.2. Helping as practice shaping the actuality of projects

Previous project-as-practice research has addressed the connection between action and social life in the project. Connaughton and Collinge (2021) e.g., found how the enactment of collaboration due to a new procurement method produced and re-reproduced an understanding of collaboration, which became part of the project's social life, while Packendorff et al. (2014) found a connection between action and direction, where direction is linked to the situated mission in the social reality. Stjerne et al. (2019) identified three different practices, which were employed to cope with tensions within inter-organizational projects and were able to illustrate how the performance of these practices produced other tensions. This strand of research thus sets out to describe how the actors' actions or practices produce and re-produce the social life of the project throughout the project's lifespan.

We contribute further to practice-based theorizing on projects. Not only have we shown how helping happens in an inter-organizational project, but we have also empirically illustrated and theoretically argued that the identification of helping behavior can produce and re-produce a reciprocal relationship between the giver and receiver of help. Consequently, helping behavior influences more than just the progression of the inter-organizational project. It also shapes the social reality within the project, thereby complicating the task of project management in predicting and planning behavior within the project. The findings suggest that the role as giver and receiver of help associated with helping behavior is of a *becoming* nature (cf. Gauthier & Ika, 2012), as the helping behavior produces and re-produces the roles. This corroborates Song et al. (2022) argument regarding how the practice turn in project management research can provide detailed insights into governing practices, even though such research may not be able to predict project performance. As such, our research contributes to a more holistic understanding of the complexities and challenges of project management in inter-organizational projects.

5.2. Implications for practice

From the perspective of the project manager, helping behavior presents challenges to their ability to perceive the project as a tool (Packendorff, 1995; Söderlund, 2004), given that they do not have complete control over their contracted resources when these resources are aligning their performances with their status as givers or receivers of help. The practical contribution of this study is thus found in the need to carefully consider the connection between action and social life in the project as actions happen. Furthermore, this connection between actions and social life applies to all social practices, which implies that project managers should pay close attention to all practices in the project. Indeed, it is recommended that project managers develop an *ethnographic toolbox* (cf. Salovaara et al., 2020) enabling them to identify the social practices being performed. This, combined with knowledge of the potential impact of the identified practice on the social reality in the project, may enable project managers to better understand the implications of how practices performed in the present can produce and re-produce the social reality within the project (Klitgaard, 2022).

5.3. Limitations

There are several limitations to the study. The first is related to our choice and definition of the social practice of helping as the case in the study. As practice theory does not allow for clearly defining a practice, it may be difficult to establish clear boundaries or criteria for what constitutes helping behavior in a given social setting. Furthermore, the choice of defining our case as a discretionary behavior is an interpretative choice. Consequently, we have constructed the case in this study paying much attention to making a distinction between our unit of analysis (the case), our unit of observation (social interactions), and the context (an inter-organizational project) to provide analytical clarity (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021a). We have also attempted to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging and critically reflecting on our own biases, assumptions, and perspectives to avoid observer bias.

Second, while the use of ethnography as a data collection method allows for providing rich data, it comes with some reliability limitations. The choice of a specific timing episode in the project may limit the validity of the findings, as behaviors observed during this period may not generalize to other phases or contexts within the project. This temporal constraint may restrict the applicability of the findings to a broader range of project situations. To mitigate this, we have provided detailed rich descriptions of the observed while acknowledging that ethnographic accounts are not a mirror of reality (Emerson et al., 2011). Furthermore, our study is limited to observations from the same setting, so further research is needed to further explore how helping behavior impacts on social life in other settings and at other stages in the project's lifespan.

Third, our practice-based understanding of behavior influences our analysis, making it difficult to provide a clear definition of helping behavior and compare helping behavior across the different segments of work. The focus of a practice-based investigation is not the behavior itself but rather how practice produces and re-produce social life. Consequently, we have provided examples of how we identify helping and refrained from comparing helping across the segments. Such a comparative approach moves the focus from the production and reproduction of social life to the categorization of actions in different settings, which is a functional approach and thus does not align with the assumptions within practice theory. We have thus not sought to achieve generalizability of the findings but have focused on transferability (e.g., Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021b) by including detailed descriptions of the study context, participants, data collection methods, and analytical procedures to enable the applicability of the research findings to other contexts or settings.

6. Conclusions

The paper has delved into the stream of project management research that focusses on behavior in inter-organizational construction projects. Whereas the traditional mechanistic view of project management emphasizes formal roles and obligations, this study has highlighted the crucial role of discretionary behavior, and in particular helping, in the social reality of inter-organizational projects. We have demonstrated that helping behavior occurs in inter-organizational projects, and we have argued that helping establishes the status of either giver or receiver of help, which in turn means that actors may align their behavior with their status of giver or receiver of help.

The role of helping behavior in facilitating project progression has been demonstrated in empirical illustrations, even in non-contractually defined segments of work. In doing so, the study highlights the reciprocity associated with helping behavior and its potential impact on project performance. The study has thus found that while helping behavior may initially solve unexpected problems, it simultaneously impacts the social life in a project, thereby challenging the mechanistic approach to project management and the ability to use the project as a tool. While this study has focused on the theoretical impact of helping behavior in an inter-organizational project, the effects could potentially extend to all types of projects and organizations, where actors are

performing helping behavior.

The theoretical contributions are within project-as-practice research as they add to the understanding of how the actors' actions and practices produce and re-produce social life within the project. We have presented two theoretical contributions. First, the presence of helping behavior challenges the mechanistic view, indicating deviations from planned behavior with organizations exhibiting a willingness to help each other. Second, the study identifies a hidden mechanism that aligns behavior with the roles of giver and receiver of help, emphasizing the importance of a project-as-practice approach. This has implications for practice. Indeed, both the research community as well as the industry should pay close attention to the potential of project-as-practice research as it adds to the understanding of how the social life in the project is becoming due to the actions in the project and so focuses attention on the here and now. In this case, how actions constituting the social practice of helping can create a hidden mechanism and thus have an impact on the project's social life even after the helping situation.

On this basis, we suggest that future research could fruitfully further address the link between discretionary behavior and the creation of reciprocity between inter-organizational members who are not contractually bound to each other. This is relevant for understanding collaborative dynamics and behavior in complex environments. In particular, in inter-organizational contexts we have shown that discretionary behavior involves boundary-spanning activities that bridge organizational boundaries and facilitate inter-organizational relationships (see also Guo et al., 2022). How individuals navigate these boundaries and negotiate differences in cultures and goals across organizational divides are, however, not well-understood. In addition to questions about boundary-spanning activities, another relevant and closely related question for future research to consider is how governance structures, e.g., in the form of policies and incentives, can be implemented to either strengthen or weaken inter-organizational ties in pursuit of specified project goals. This aligns with Van Offenbeek and Vos' (2016) suggestion to focus on the interconnections between stakeholders and issues, as these are important for a project's progress and outcomes, and Benítez-Ávila et al. (2019) call for fined-grained insights on the relationship between contractual and relational governance to understand the managerial struggle embedded in multiple organizational levels.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anne Klitgaard: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Stefan Christoffer Gottlieb:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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