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**No sense of belonging: On sharing and the ethical imagination in project teams**

**Abstract**

This paper seeks to contribute to a view of a project team's space of everyday action via the lens of enacted ethics reframed as a highly situated and socially accomplished practice. Theoretically, it shares concerns with poststructuralist and postmodern views attempting to reconnect ethical theorising with management practice instead of separating these two domains. Yet, it does not subscribe to a relativist approach which would render ethical accounts impossible in practice. It thus resonates more with moves to link antiessentialist positions of moral agency to a kind of ethics where responsibility becomes a key concept and is understood as an engagement with others and otherness (e.g. ten Bos and Willmott, 2001; Clegg and Rhodes, 2006; Jones, 2007). The latter have important implications for a more fine-grained understanding of ethics in complex spaces of action. Taken together, they tend to lean towards the elaboration of an "ethics of encounter without a commitment to resolution or closure" (Campbell and Shapiro, 1999: xi, xvii) Such 'encounter' has been variously explained. For example, authors have drawn on Levinas (1985) who recognises the unconditional responsibility for the other and its primacy over any social meaning and cultural context. They also employed Derrida's concepts (1990) to highlight deconstruction, instability of meaning and the potential for alternative readings of reality, which would themselves be capable of generating "justice" (ibid.: 945).

This paper contends that much of this kind of work has concentrated on the individual and the singular 'Other' for whom we would be responsible. Instead, here it is proposed that there is a fundamental need to theorise what we may come to have 'together'. It is closely related to a view of "how we are "us" among us" (Nancy, 2000: 26). On the background of an ethnographic investigation of enacted practice over time of an inter-organisational project team comprising management consultants and

a client for designing an information systems development project, the paper discusses how ethics was neglected or made possible at the collective level. I performed a two-way narrative analysis of interviews employing Riessman's (1993) adapted method of Gee's poetic structures in texts, with special attention to the storytellers' use of "poetic tropes" (Gabriel, 2000) that positioned self and others in the team. The analysis emphasises the tensions and contradictions in constructing selfunderstandings leading to different forms of ethical imagination which encompasses both individual experience and expectations of team member as to how to live and work together. This provides us with a deeper understanding of the set of practices and human motives behind choices to make sense of a collectively enacted ethics in context.

Although starting from a dynamic view of project management practice, research findings widen the discussion and tentatively address questions that are often neglected within the realm of business ethics. They refer to the creation of alternative forms of citizenship which need to be fostered in fragile and hybrid spaces of collective action such as those of inter-organisational teams, and the possibility (or indeed desirability) of solidarity. This means to engage with both ethics and politics, in an effort to acknowledge their subtle interrelationships and "the ideological limitations of business ethics and as a provocation for further debate" (Parker, 2003: 198).

## References

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