

# OPENING UP RISK MANAGEMENT THROUGH GOFFMAN'S DRAMATURGICAL APPROACH

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Although a great deal has been written on risk management in construction field, less attention has been given to risk management as a qualitatively dynamic process of what people do in everyday organizational practices. In this paper, we address this lack by drawing on Erving Goffman's (1959) metaphor of life as a stage to view risk management as a social interaction. Specifically, we adopt Goffman's dramaturgical analysis to raise questions on how we can study risk management in construction beyond prevailing techno-rational approaches. Viewing risk through Goffman-inspired dramaturgical lens, the management of risk is not simply a technical process, but also a dynamic social interaction where the thinking and doing of risk and risk management are staged. Thus, there is a need for deeper engagement with actual performances of risk management embedded in everyday organisational practices.

Keywords: dramaturgical analysis, Goffman, risk management

## INTRODUCTION

Risk management is a longstanding matter of concern in the field construction management research, and regarded as an integral part of project management. There appears to be two key strands in current research on risk management construction. On the one hand, scholars have treated risk as an object (Zhang, 2011) to be (often quantitatively) assessed, modelled and managed (Fung *et al.*, 2010; KarimiAzari *et al.*, 2014, and; Leslie and Lix, 2014). There is an overwhelming body of literature that supports the development of formal risk management based on objective, rational decision making (Zhang, 2011). On the other hand, some have suggested that risk is a subjective and socially constructed phenomena, where experience and intuition play a crucial part in our perceptions of and responses to risk (Tah *et al.*, 1994; Akintoye and MacLeod, 1997, and; Shen, 1997). Lyons and Skitmore (2004) for example surveyed 200 construction contractors in Queensland in Australia to find that intuition, judgement and experience, rather than formal risk management techniques, are most frequently relied on.

There is a growing movement that argues for a need to move beyond the development of new techniques to consider more carefully the practices of risk management. Laryea and Hughes (2008), for instance, stressed that introducing new models or methods may not necessarily be useful because practitioners prefer to conduct risk analysis in a simple and personalised manner rather than to depend on sophisticated methods that require detailed input information, which is not always available in every

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case. Indeed, despite the variety of available techniques and methods, formal risk management has been criticised for its inadequacy in bringing more certainty to a project by minimising threats and maximising opportunities (Tang *et al.*, 2007, and; Osipova and Eriksson, 2013). Stalker (2003) argued that the scientific and technical approaches to risk separates the thinking about risk away from the actual practical context in which risk behaviours and actions of risk management are played out. Thus, there is increasing recognition for the need to examine the realities of risk management practices more qualitatively.

In this paper, we adhere to this line of thinking by drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor to raise questions on how risk management practices in construction can be studied more qualitatively beyond prevailing techno-rational approaches. For Goffman (1959), metaphors connect realms of human experience and imagination, which direct the human perceptions and interpretations of reality, which in turn can help facilitate better representations and understanding of the world. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) considered social life as analogous to theatre, where individuals behave like stage performers in their everyday interactions with others. Such a perspective has seen renewed interest in recent organisational scholarship that analyse inter alia issues of workplace dynamics, leadership, and the market (Gardner and Avolio, 1998; Sharma and Grant, 2011, and; Darr and Pinch, 2013; Urick, 2014; Rosengren, forthcoming).

In this paper, we use Goffman's dramaturgical analysis is to review and examine risk management in construction, with a view to open up the 'black box' of risk management in construction and identify possible research questions that can aid in the qualitative assessment of construction risk management. To give this shape, we first present a brief overview of key concepts according to Goffman's dramaturgical approach, which illustrates the notion of regions, actors, audience, performance, and impression management. Following this salient review, we apply these concepts to raise questions around how risk and risk management are conceptualised in construction management (i.e. what), who the key actors/players of risk and risk management are, where and when are risk management staged and to what consequences, and what possibilities a Goffman-inspired approach would create for understanding how and why risk management is done in practice. In so doing, the paper concludes with recommendations for future research on risk management in construction.

## **THEORETICAL ORIENTATION: RISK MANAGEMENT AS A SOCIAL INTERACTION**

In emphasising the formal processes of risk management, the central tenet in much scholarship on construction risks takes the view that risk is an object to be tamed that is free of people's minds and values. A corollary of such an approach is that the scholars have predominately focussed on the technical aspects of risk, and efforts on promoting and accelerating the standardization of risk analysis and management (Zhang, 2011). Zhang (2011) noted that the standard approach often starts with characterising the risk phenomena in objective terms, using , and the use of scientific methods (such as data collection and quantification) are considered to be beneficial to the identification, explanation, forecast, and control of risks.

Prevailing research on risks have tended to focus on quantifying probabilities of risk occurrences and risk consequences (Starr and Whipple, 1980). In quantifying risk probabilities, scholarship on risk take a reductionist view to focus on analysing risk as

an objective entity (Bradbury, 1989). Such approaches tend to assume a value-neutral position where the emphasis (and faith) is placed on the development of mathematical tools and techniques (Shrader-Frechette, 1991). However, Stalker (2003) argues that taking a technical approach to risk ignores the social signs and isolates a particular risk or risk behaviour from the context in which those associated risks and risk behaviors are situated. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to shift the attention away from the formal techniques to consider risk management practices situated in context.

By repositioning the focus towards the situated context of risk and risk management practices, there is a need to consider risk from a subjective, less formal viewpoint. This has a number of implications. First, different people will potentially have different perspectives of identifying what constitutes risk for them, as well as different approaches for making sense of, and thus managing, risk. Second, by emphasising subjective aspects of risk, we also take the view that, far from reducible into an objective entity, risk is constituted by the process of social construction and interaction. Thus, by freeing ourselves from the shackles of formal risk management techniques to consider the subjective character (and inter-subjectivities) of risk, we can get closer to understanding how people make sense of risk and their concerns about the future. In so doing, the emphasis is turned on to examining risk not in technical terms, but as a consequence and condition of political, moral and ethical, as well as emotion responses to their everyday experiences, encounters and circumstances (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983). To put simply, the interaction and interplay of people and events, along with their emotive reactions contributes to the how risks are conceptualised and how risk management is enacted.

Thus, social processes are key to unlock an understanding of how perceptions of risk are mediated by the experiences and values of people in organisations (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983). In taking into account the subjectivity of risk, one potentially expands the scope of the management of risk, where risk consequences are not limited to physical losses but also involve secondary or derivative impacts, such as belief and blame (Douglas, 2013), reputation (Power, 2004), shame (Wolff, 2006), justice and fairness (Slovic, 2000), and so on. The purpose of risk assessment is then not limited to a quantitative measure designed to provide early-warning, calculative support for the sharing eventualities but are instead broadened to consider how perceptions of risk are acculturated (Renn 1992). In so doing, one can shift the emphasis to contextualise decisions made around the management of risks (Zhang, 2011).

It is to these situated contexts – the relationships between formal and informal approaches to risk management – that we reflect on in this paper. To facilitate this reflection, we draw upon a selection of concepts from Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. According to Goffman (1959), a dramaturgical approach examines social reality in the presentation of self in everyday life. This can be used to understand human behaviour as theatrically-staged performance (Sinha *et al.*, 2012). The term "dramaturgy" invokes the metaphor of life as theatre. Goffman (1959) introduced the dramaturgy metaphor to describe an individual in an organisation as an actor in a play putting on a show (front) for others in interaction. As Goffman (1959: 78) noted,

"All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify."

Goffman (1959) explained that people act on the stage while they are required to manage their settings, clothing, words, and verbal actions to express a particular impression to others (Goffman 1959). Thus, Goffman (1959) provided a few key concepts to help us understand what he termed as 'impression management', which connects the actor and the audience; these concepts include the regions of the front-stage and the back-stage, actor, performance, character, audience, and team performance. Goffman (1959) defines performance as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by its continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on its observers" (Goffman, 1959, p.22). He distinguished between two key regions of any performance, namely the front-stage and the back -stage. As Goffman (1959: 109) noted,

It is clear that accentuated facts make their appearance in what I have called a front region; it should be just as clear that there may be another region – a 'back region' or 'backstage' – where the suppressed facts make an appearance. A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course... It is here that the capacity if a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. (114-115)

According to Manning (2008), understanding these performance regions can help open up the 'black box' of organisation; rather than to treat organisation as a done deal, a Goffman-inspired analysis of organisation would delve deeper into "the ways in which 'organization' becomes meaningful to individuals", and how "it can at times be liberating, enlivening or oppressive" (Manning, 2008: 683). ). Applying this line of thinking to the examination of risk, one could unpack more meaningfully where risk matters in the various performance regions of organisational life (e.g. board meetings, external-facing media and press representations, internal communications). Although there are different authenticities found between the front and back stages of any performance, Sharma and Grant (2011) stressed the importance of "stage management", where an absence of stage management can be seen in clear segregation between back and front that serves to produces incursions, disruptions and faux pas, which in turn serves to weaken the leader's performance.

A second concept relates to the importance of Goffman's impression management in which Goffman (1959) discussed on how to deliver and maintain a coherent performance that captivates the audience. This aspect has inspired a number of studies in organisational studies. For instance, Urick (2014) utilises the dramaturgical theory and impression management in order to illustrate how and why an individual may choose to act or not act in a way that fits the generation's "illusion" of coherence. Urick (2014) explained that some individuals may "act" according to social expectations of their generation despite their own personal characteristics or preferences, while others behave in ways that distance themselves from stereotypical expectations. Moreover, individuals might "act" or engage in impression management techniques to make others within a context think that they fit a generation's "illusion". Urick (2014) maintained that this has implications for the ways human resource managers become aware of how employees can use impression management techniques to act or not act in accordance with what would fit an organisational cultural mould. In Sharma and Grant (2011) study of Steve Jobs, the late CEO of Apple Inc., they examined how storytelling was used to create an impression for Apple's followers, and the power of the narrative in generating charisma such that the audience (followers) can develop a sense of attachment of Steve Jobs to the people,

places, objects, and events that make up their everyday lives. In more recent study, Darr and Pinch (2013) examined the sales floor as a stage and utilised dramaturgical approach to show how the fundamental ingredient of economic transactions, the situated constitution of social obligation, is achieved. Thus, the act of “selling”, offering goods and/or services, and the act of “buying”, offering money in return for gaining possession of those goods and/or services, through the main involved actors, buyers and sellers, are reciprocal and place obligations on each party at different stages of the sales processes. This dramaturgical analysis viewed the acts of selling and buying as flexible and interactive scripts, which help to build trust and rapport that in turn secure the obligation of the exchange partner to continue with the sales process (Darr and Pinch, 2013).

A Goffman-inspired approach to studying organisational life is thus “to study not only what people do, but how they rationalize or explain the whys and wherefores of that work” (Manning, 2008: 684). In this way, by engaging with the performances of everyday organisational life (which can at times be theatrically dramatic), one can become more reflexive in searching for where the (truthful) actions take place, and with what intents and consequences. In this next section, we apply this line of thinking to raise questions on how we can study risk management in construction beyond prevailing techno-rational approaches.

## **APPLYING DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS IN QUESTIONING RISK MANAGEMENT IN CONSTRUCTION**

Following these insights from the literature on the use dramaturgical analysis as applied in organisational scholarship, we consider the possibilities of adopting such an approach to the study of risk management in construction. In this section, we explore more how these concepts can help us raise questions on the 5Ws and 1H (what, why, who, where, when, and how) that could open up future research in understanding risk management in construction.

### **What constitutes risk management? The tools of risk management as part of the wider setting for impression management**

The literature is replete with studies that seek to develop methods, techniques and tools for identifying and assessing risks, and for creating managerial interventions. A Goffman-inspired analysis would prompt us to examine these techniques and ask what other roles such tools play in shaping decision-making and organisational. For Goffman, techniques and tools are not necessarily designed to guide action, but they also serve to constrain actions. As Manning (2008) stressed, “organizational artefacts such as mission statements, goals and objectives, strategic plans and the like function as tools to reduce choice, not to guide it” ( 681). He added that such tools are merely “background knowledge, only on occasion front stage and immediate” (Manning, 2008: *ibid.*). Thus, these techniques form part of what Goffman (1959) would call the ‘setting’:

...there is the ‘setting’, involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it. (Goffman, 1959, 32-33)

Indeed, the effectiveness of a technique lies not in the technique itself, but in the use of technique in practice. Rather than to take these tools as rational, objective instruments that guide decision-makers as passive recipients of such tools, a Goffman-inspired analysis will question how these tools as props of the wider performance

setting can help organisational actors stage their characters 'successfully' with a view to create an impression (as opposed to reality) on others, whether the 'others' (audience) relate to stakeholders internal or external to the organisation.

### **Why risk management? From the management of risk to the staging of risk**

It is accepted wisdom that risk management is a critical part of project management. The purpose of doing risk management, as we are often told, is to maximise the positive opportunities and minimise the negative consequences of uncertainty (Osipova and Eriksson, 2013, and; Lyons and Skitmore, 2004). Moreover, there is the rhetoric that the business environment we inhabit today is characterised by high levels of risk and complexity (Zwikael and Ahn, 2011). This is certainly how the construction industry is often portrayed, as a risky business due to its complexity, the fragmented nature of multiple stakeholders, long production times and complex interactions. Furthermore, projects are usually depicted as high-pressure environments, driven by compressed schedules, inadequate budgets, designs, and frequently changing requirements; managing such risk and eliminating such uncertainty is therefore crucial (Taroun, 2014).

Such a view takes as given the existence of risk as a thing, and downplays the possibility of risk as a symbol. Parton (1996: 98) suggests that: "risk is not a thing or a set of realities waiting to be unearthed but a way of thinking." For instance, in Ulrich Beck's Risk Society, he argued that society is becoming riskier not because the world is inherently more risky. Rather, it is the constant anticipation of risk, what he called the staging of risk, which produces the illusion that we are riskier. Beck (1992) also argued that the solution to mitigating risks lies not in the development of yet more sophisticated methods, for these methods can sometimes result in the fallacy that risks are being addressed when what is only addressed is the calculative assessment of risks. Thus, a Goffman-inspired dramaturgical analysis would allow us to open up the 'black box' of risk management to question more deeply why we stage risk in organisations and to what intents and purposes. In this way, a Goffman-inspired analysis would not take as given that risk is something to be simply managed out.

### **How would we study risk through a dramaturgical approach? Bringing back life to the techno-rational instruments of risk management**

Traditionally, managing risks in projects involves the systematic process of identifying, assessing, and responding to project risk (see e.g. PMI BoK). These processes require different activities (actions), which require individual(s) to do (perform) these processes (actions and roles). However, if we took the staging of risk seriously, then this would transcend the mere development tools and techniques, to consider more deeply different approaches as a form of acting on a stage in interaction with others (e.g. the audience, a point we will turn to in a while). Such actions are constrained within a set of structural frames which enable and disable certain lines of action, known as "scripts".

Scripts even in the hands of unpractised players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. (Goffman, 1959, 78)

Therefore, we argue that by focussing on the development of techno-rational instruments in taming organisational risk, we take the life out of the realities of staging risks in organisations. It is therefore important that we move beyond prescribing risk management tools and approaches, to bring to life in de-scribing the dynamic realities of risk management through such engaged forms of scholarship as ethnography.

### **Where do we do risk management? Examining the regions of risk management performances**

By treating risk management as a systematic process identifying, assessing, and responding to risk, prevailing scholarship on risk management in construction ignores the organisational spaces and places where risk management is supposedly taking place. Recent scholarship has begun to question where risk management takes place across various levels of project performance. For instance, Teller *et al.*, (2014) suggest that practitioners need to address risks at the portfolio level in addition and different to addressing risks at the project level. Teller *et al.*, (2014) also argued that we (wrongly) continue to treat risk management at the portfolio level in the same way as we do for projects.

To this end, Goffman's analogy of the stage, and the regions of the front-stage and back-stage, would be instructive. It is important to recognise and classify different regions in the risk management processes because in different regions different actions are being played. Thus, the front stage and back stage should be identified in risk management, and with it questions can be raised as to where the truthful performances (and performative effects) take place.

Therefore, the systematic process of identifying, assessing, and responding to project risk should be evaluated in different regions in order to examine other aspects such as political and social elements, which are downplayed in most of technical and formal approaches of risk management. In addition, dramaturgical analysis considers actors and examines how individuals subjectively and interactively construct what risk means in a specific social context.

### **Who are the actors and audiences in risk management?**

Extant research on risk management in construction have often assumed that the role of the rational, purposive actor in making objective decisions about the management of risks. As we already argued, this ignores the subjective dimensions of risk management, and overwhelmingly takes an individualistic approach to understanding risk management in construction (Osipova and Eriksson, 2013). As we discussed above, risk management as we view it is a performance that stems out of a social interaction, between that of the team of organisational actors performing and creating an impression on the audience. More recent project management scholarship has begun to raise questions on the heterogeneous landscape of actors and audiences in the staging of risk management. Van Os *et al.*, (2015), for example, state that risk differs among stakeholders and these variations are based on differences in knowledge expertise, roles and responsibilities, and interests. In addition, Osipova and Eriksson (2013) argue that these variations and collaboration of many different actors are important in order to obtain a comprehensive view and avoid a narrow and biased perspective of project risk.

Thus, risk management should involve examining how stakeholders have come up with different views and interpretations on the project risks, and how these discrepancies and responses could themselves be problematic and threats in other stakeholders' eyes (Busby and Zhang, 2008). Busby and Zhang (2008) argue that the stakeholders need to recognise and be clear not only about the risks for themselves, but also the risks for others. This view is being reflected in examining risk discourse study by (Van Os *et al.*, 2015). According to Van Os *et al.*, (2015), the identity of the project team and the goals of the project are being threaten by project risks, consequently, the project team tried to eliminate risk by withholding information from

the stakeholders they regarded responsible for inflicting risks on the project. This opens a space to consider the term discourse, which refers to the way people talk about phenomenon (e.g. risk) in actual conversation (Whittle and Mueller, 2011).

Based on dramaturgical analysis, Goffman (1959) talks about crucial roles and argues that there are some discrepant roles, which bring a person into a social establishment in a false mask. Goffman (1959) introduced these discrepant roles namely, the role of 'informer' who pretends to the performers to be a member of their team, is allowed to come backstage and to acquire destructive information, the role of 'shill' who acts as though he were an ordinary member of audience but is in fact in league with the performers, the go-between or mediator, the 'non-person' who plays this role are present during the interaction but in some respects do not take the role either of performer or of audience, nor do they pretend to be what they are not, and 'service specialist' who specialise in the construction, repair, and maintenance of the show their clients maintain before other people. Therefore, the dramaturgical analysis can facilitate the identification of different stakeholders and roles with a view to produce more holistic accounts of risk management as a social performance.

### **When concerns about risk changes over time: moving beyond atemporal accounts of risk management**

While the development of tools for managing risk ignores the spaces in which risk management takes place, existing scholarship on risk is also relatively atemporal. More recently, scholars like Osipova and Eriksson (2013) have argued that notions of risk changes over the course of the project life cycle, and this requires ongoing adjustment of our assessment and mitigation of risks. Shi *et al.*, (2015) also argued that approaches to risk management ought to dynamically change, as they suggested carving up a project into four stages, including i.e. pre-preparation, preparation, implementation, and operation. Shi *et al.*, (2015) indicated that different stakeholders would have different interpretations of project risks across these various stages. Like acts in a theatrical performance, a dramaturgical approach to risk management will prompt us to raise questions over how concerns about risk change over time, and with what consequences.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper we argued that the extant literature on risk management in construction is overwhelmingly technical, where scholars have predominately been concerned with the development of rational, objective instruments with a view to tame risks in projects. The social and subjective aspects are, as a result, often downplayed. In this paper, we have taken a social interactionist view of risk management, inspired by Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. We do so in order to open up the 'black box' of risk management in construction projects, and to raise various questions in terms of how risk management is staged in everyday organisational life.

By invoking the dramaturgical the metaphor of life as theatre, we seek to move beyond structuralist, individualist, and instrumentalist accounts of risk management to render problematic the actors and audiences that participate in the social interaction of risk management. We also call for deeper, more engaged forms of scholarship to situate how risk management is acted out in everyday organisational routines by delving more thoroughly into the various performance regions of organisational life. In so doing we also urge for students of risk management to resist thinking about risk management as a consequence of decision-makers passively accepting the outcomes

of objective risk analysis, to consider risk management practices as an active, ongoing accomplishment of managing impressions on others, whether these 'others' are internal or external audiences to the organisation in question.

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