



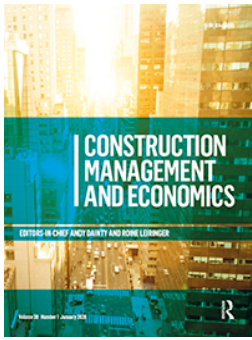
## **Populating the social realm: New roles arising from social procurement**

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## Populating the social realm: new roles arising from social procurement

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### ABSTRACT

Employment requirements, as part of social procurement, are increasingly used in construction procurement as a tool to mitigate issues of exclusion on the job market. To create a better understanding how employment requirements nurtures a new type of actor, here named the “employment requirement professional” (ERP), the aim of this paper is to study how this role is framed in terms of work practices and professional identity. Building on 21 semi-structured interviews in the Swedish construction sector, a detailed account of who works with employment requirements, how and why they conduct their work is provided. The findings show how ERPs mediate between contrasting interests when they create new social procurement roles and practices; how they enact different approaches to promote social sustainability, how their roles are formed by multiple and reciprocal lines of actions, and how they make sense of who they are and what type of work they engage in. The research contributes to a discussion on effects from social procurement in construction and the emergence of a new professional role, their identity and work practices.

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### KEYWORDS

Employment requirements;  
identity; practices;  
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### Introduction

Like many other European countries, Sweden is struggling with social exclusion – “a multidimensional disadvantage that can occur in many areas of life such as education, work, employment, housing and social participation” (Brännström 2004, p. 2516) – where some urban areas are characterized by unemployed or low-income citizens, rundown housing in need of refurbishment (Olsson *et al.* 2015) and tenants that cannot afford rent increases due to extensive refurbishment investment (Jonsson *et al.* 2017, Olsson *et al.* 2015). There are groups of people having problems entering the job market, such as refugees (Lundborg 2013, Bratsberg *et al.* 2014, Åslund *et al.* 2017) and disabled individuals (OECD 2010). At the same time, there is an increasing lack of construction workers, making it difficult for contractors to submit tenders for the required refurbishment projects, as they have too few construction workers available (Bennewitz 2017). In an attempt to address issues related to these challenges, municipal and private organizations (such as housing companies) see possibilities to implement *employment requirements* in their procurement processes.

Employment requirements, as a representation of *social procurement*, are tender award criteria used as means to create employment opportunities for people that have difficulties to enter the job market through, for example, internships or (temporary) employment in construction projects (Lind and Mjörnell 2015). When it comes to social criteria, in a content analysis of 451 tender documents from 10 countries, Montalbán-Domingo *et al.* (2019) found that social criteria relating to the employment of vulnerable groups are the second most common social criteria used in public construction procurement after criteria relating to health and safety. They also found that globally, social criteria are increasingly used (Montalbán-Domingo *et al.* 2019).

Employment requirements are a new type of criteria in the sense that it focuses on something less related to the physical object of the procurement; thus employment issues rather than the building (Petersen 2018). Moreover, social procurement – which Barraket and Weissman (2009, p. iii) describe as: “*the use of purchasing power to create social value*” – is a social sustainability concept that involves measures

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related to health and safety, buying from women-owned and minority-owned businesses, and employment creation for disadvantaged groups. When procurement is used in a strategic manner as means to meet not only financial goals but also social goals, this has organizational effects for the sector and its actors, with changing roles and work practices as consequences (Barraket *et al.* 2016, Petersen 2018, Troje and Kadefors 2018).

Although social procurement as a concept is new in many countries, procurement has been used to reach social objectives and to influence employment relationships for a long time. Social procurement in relation to employment has covered everything from stipulating working hours and fair wages, offering employment to disabled World War I veterans in the UK, affirmative action for African Americans in the US in the 1960's, and the treatment of aboriginal populations in Canada (McCrudden 2004). Studies on social procurement related to employment have for example focused on benefitting local, small, or minority-owned businesses (Walker and Preuss 2008, Loader 2013, Loosemore and Denny-Smith 2016) and there are a number of studies that investigate social enterprises (Loosemore 2016). However, even though social procurement is emphasized as important in both business and politics and also in research, this field suffers from weak theorization, conceptualization and empirical investigation (Walker and Brammer 2012, Barraket *et al.* 2016, Loosemore 2016).

Very few studies focus on (professional) roles related to the development of employment requirements. One exception is Sutherland *et al.* (2015), who, based on a survey of individual public contracts, found that both construction clients and contractors in Scotland have begun to create new roles solely dedicated to working with employment requirements (community benefit clauses). Another example is Murphy and Eadie (2019) who approach social procurement as a social service innovation that enables creating social value in the form of employment opportunities. Social procurement deviates from traditional work practices as it delivers additional social value which lies outside of the contractor's area of expertise. As a consequence, they found that new roles, like community benefit managers, were increasingly hired to work with social procurement. In their research, they also saw that contractors adopted a person-centric approach, where practices were tailored for each project context in order to ensure that the "right" social value was created.

Employment requirements are thus for many a novel and complex type of criteria that need new competencies. To build competences related to employment requirements, construction clients have assigned the responsibility for employment requirements to specific procurers; contractors have established new employment requirement coordinators in their organizations and many existing professional roles now have extended responsibilities related to employment requirements (Sutherland *et al.* 2015). Moreover, discussing the current state of social procurement research and governance structures, Barraket *et al.* (2016, p. 51) claim that social procurement has become a "distinct domain of practice"; a domain likely to become an institutional field of its own. Built on empirical studies in several organizational settings the authors argue that when multiple actors work towards a common goal, such as creating social value through procurement, this collective work may become normative. This means that in a yet-to-be-fixed institutional field of social procurement, traditional roles might become contested, negotiated or reified, leading to new roles being created. Additionally, it leads to an establishment of new roles in the construction sector; that is, a new set of actors that populate the social realm of construction (Sutherland *et al.* 2015, Barraket *et al.* 2016, Troje and Kadefors 2018, Murphy and Eadie 2019). Moreover, by developing frameworks or templates for how to conduct social procurement, practices can become established despite the absence of institutional norms and rules within the field (Barraket *et al.* 2016). Being emergent rather than fully institutionalized, roles and relationships between actors become important elements in the process of legitimizing social procurement. Thus, studies of new social procurement roles and practices are important in order to investigate the ongoing development of social sustainability.

To use the construction sector as an empirical context when studying employment requirements is highly relevant, as the sector has been targeted as a suitable sector for implementing social procurement practices (Sutherland *et al.* 2015). Moreover, professionals often have a leading role in the creation of institutions (Scott, 2008), it is, therefore, reasonable to assume that social procurement professionals are important carriers of a social sustainability agenda in the sector. Studying identities is an established way understand and theorize processes of organizing and Brown (2019) suggests that identity studies should be more present within the sub-fields of organizational theory, like in the case of this paper, construction management research.

The aim of the study is to create a better understanding of how social procurement nurtures new types of actors and vice versa. In order to fulfil this aim, new professional roles created in relation to social procurement and employment requirements are studied. This includes studying how these “employment requirement professionals” (ERPs) define their role and make sense of who they are in relation to social sustainability and what type of work they engage in. The study contributes to a discussion on roles and identities in construction management, but mainly aims to add empirical and theoretical knowledge to the field of social procurement as well as to social sustainability in construction.

The paper is structured as follows: First, the introduction has presented a review of previous research on social procurement practices, which explains the phenomenon and establishes a context for the study. This is followed by the theoretical framework, defining the concepts of *professional identity*, *role* and *work practices* and also providing an overview of previous studies that theorize new professional roles in the construction sector. Together this provides the analytical lens through which the problem is understood. After this the method is outlined, followed by the findings. The paper closes with a discussion, conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## Theoretical framework

Drawing upon studies of changing roles in other fields and in connection to other phenomena help to illustrate the emergence of a wider social procurement practise. Creating an increased understanding of how new roles related to social procurement are shaped in practice, and vice versa, follows a vein of research in construction management that emphasizes the need for interpretive studies on professional identities and roles as means to deepen our understanding of processes and outcomes related to sustainable development and change in construction (Hughes and Hughes 2013, Brown and Phua 2011).

### Defining professional identity, role and work practices

In line with a generic definition of identity as the personal characteristics by which a person is recognized and known, Styhre (2012) describes *professional identity* as the:

totality of images of the self and norms and beliefs related to such images that guide and structure everyday practices and behaviours [at work], helping

the actor to cope with both demands and expectations articulated by others in a domain of professional practice. (Styhre 2012, p. 634)

Individuals actively strive to make sense of their work life, and by this, a double-sided impact is recognized (Gioia *et al.* 2010), where practice influences identity creation and vice versa. Here the construct of role has been suggested as a meaning-creating device and as an inherently incomplete and emergent intermediary in identity construction processes (Simpson and Carroll 2008). In this view, professional identities do not exist *per se*, they are social constructs shaped in practice through ongoing social processes of interactions between individuals, technology, artefacts and the institutional context in which they are embedded (Brown and Phua 2011, Styhre 2012). This approach challenges the traditional view that roles are presumed as relatively stable and settled in contractual agreements and/or dictated in cultural relations (Georg and Tryggestad 2009).

In a sociological sense, the term *role* is used to express a social behaviour that is expected from a particular social category and indicates status or positions in formal systems (Lynch 2007). In such a perspective, roles are associated with identified social positions where normative expectations generate roles, which may vary among individuals as they reflect formal demands and/or pressure from informal groups (*ibid.*). Expectations of a specific role may vary greatly and are continuously determined by its relation to other roles. Although pre-defined roles may exist, individuals also select to which extent they may take on, adopt or reject a specific role (Simpson and Carroll 2008).

Professionals are defined by their *work practices*, i.e. what they do (Pratt *et al.* 2006). In understanding the roles and identities of professionals, it is, therefore, important to investigate what they do in terms of their work tasks. Characteristics of professionals are strong emotional engagement in their work and a high sense of responsibility for taken decisions and behaviour (Mieg 2009). In literature, it is often suggested that professionals’ work practice includes knowledge-based problem-solving skills, high independence and judgement skills, conformance to codes of ethics and that they occupy a specific competence or expertise area (Styhre 2011). The discourse on competence includes formalized knowledge, various skills, attitudes and personal characteristics related to work performance. However, the work tasks of professionals are also in a continuous and iterative process that is simultaneously affected by the professionals themselves and/or formed through proxies such as various

educational programs aimed at specific professional groups or various professional institutions (Brown and Phua 2011). In Sweden, the self-identification among managers within the construction, regardless of their functions and responsibilities, is less bound towards educational programmes and instead often relates to an idealized role of someone that knows “how to build” (Styhre 2012, Löwstedt and Räisänen 2014).

### ***Studies on professional identities and roles in a construction context***

Actors can adopt several contradictory roles and social identities simultaneously, albeit with varying success (Bévort and Suddaby 2016, Abdelnour *et al.* 2017). For example, Abdelnour *et al.* (2017) talk about “modular individuals” to emphasize that individuals embrace different roles, abilities and social skills, where these different “modules” enable individuals to take part in many collective groups and environments. Georg and Tryggstad (2009), based on a case study of the prestigious Turning Torso skyscraper in Sweden, discuss the hybrid role of project management as an emergent and malleable outcome of the interaction not only between individuals but also between individuals and the devices they use. With evidence from three episodes from the construction project their paper illustrates how being placed between various formal roles, a hybrid role can both adapt to formal roles and negotiate and challenge them. However, Edwards (2010) regards this negotiation as problematic, as it might lead to trade-offs between priorities of another profession and the practices of the profession that have initially shaped the professional identity. This, in turn, may cause role ambiguity and conflicts. Conflicts and tensions between professions, along with ambiguity between formal and informal roles, have been in focus in previous research in construction, where it has been found that professionals develop alternative identities to adapt to different situations. In a series of studies with a focus on the development of environmental management practice in the Swedish construction industry, Gluch (2009) demonstrates how environmental professionals create formal roles in line with their job description and also take on multiple informal roles to adapt to different project practices. Gluch argues that project practices both frame and constrain the identity, work and legitimacy of roles. It is concluded that environmental professionals need a strong sense of integrity to oppose project practices that counteract environmental management practices.

Although there are many contradictory practices that may be tricky for professionals to navigate between, they may also have the opportunity to influence their situation considerably. Daudigeos’ (2013) case study on how staff professionals (occupational safety and health managers) gain the ability to promote a new set of safety practices in a large French construction company shows parallels to the situation of the ERPs and the new social procurement practices they promote. Based on in-depth qualitative data and informed by institutional work they found that staff professionals created unexpected coalitions with other organizational members to get access to more legitimate organizational processes; they also used various types of influence tactics depending on stakeholder, such as “adapting frames and conversation in real time; manipulating the organizational processes, programmes, and systems to convince an organizational member; and leveraging the market power of their company to influence clients, suppliers, and subcontractors” (Daudigeos 2013, p. 742). It is argued that the agency of a staff professional lies in their ability to use a set of the influence tactics mentioned above. An important skill for a staff professional is being able to adapt rhetorical arguments to the context in hand. Herein lies also the power from dominating an area of expertise so they can select evidence and create arguments that influence others’ actions (cf. Gluch and Svensson 2018).

To further the understanding of professionals’ role and agency in relation to construction practice, Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema (2016) developed a model to display agency of environmental experts and to capture tensions between various forms of institutional work processes. Their article discusses tensions between practice, agency and institutions and concludes that contradictions between personal role expectations of being projective and future-oriented clashes with others role expectations which causes stress and a sense of not being able to do a “good job”. Similar to the ERP role, environmental experts are an example of a new type of role in construction that work in-between organizational belongings and across professions (Hughes and Hughes 2013). New roles of working in-between are the focus of a recent study by Karrbom Gustavsson (2018). Adopting a theoretical lens of liminality (transitory state of uncertainty and ambiguity) she discusses new boundary spanning roles in the construction industry (the partnering manager, the building logistics specialist, and the BIM (building information model) coordinator). Based on multiple case studies, Karrbom Gustavsson (2018) shows how

these individuals negotiate boundary interfaces between different communities of practice and also how they challenged industry norms. She found that they often conducted multi-liminal work on many levels, and never left the fluent state of liminality. A consequence of this is that the professional roles never become fully defined or fixed. Similar to the perspective that roles never become fully fixed, Chan (2016) argues that unlike the traditional view of expertise as something to be possessed and accumulated over time, expertise should be seen as something more open-ended, on-going and processual. In an ethnographic study of environmental expertise “in-the-making” in how an airport developed its infrastructure for increased capacity while balancing environmental concerns, Chan (2016) found that expertise was incidental and continuously shaped by intuition and in interaction with others.

Within the context of social procurement, there are few studies that focus on professional roles and that specifically address the construction sector. Of particular interest for the objective of our study is Barraket *et al.* (2016), who suggest that actors working with social procurement enable connections between different organizational parties, and thus take an intermediary translating role where they have to align to the practices of multiple professional groups. This can be compared with the liminal roles described by Karrbom Gustavsson (2018). In this role, they are expected to encourage collaboration across organizational boundaries and disseminate selected practices. Thus, similar to the staff professionals in Daudigeos (2013) study, they have a great opportunity to advocate and shape policies related to social procurement, and therein find a possibility to shape and legitimize social procurement and its included practices in a wider organizational context. Barraket *et al.* (2016) state that these actors may take an expert or a supportive role and deliver knowledge on best practice, as well as create interest, demand and capacity to deliver social value through the mean of social procurement. Subsequently, as intermediaries, they are important inscribers of norms and promoters of the diffusion of social procurement practices.

### Methodology and research approach

Previous studies find that increased use of employment requirements in the procurement process has given rise to a new role in the construction sector, here labelled the “employment requirement professional” (ERP). As the empirical findings will show, this

is not a well-defined professional role yet, but it does embed some distinct characteristics that will be further described in the paper. The research approach taken in this study suggests that it is important to frame the study in stories and narratives from the empirical reality as lived by ERPs to better understand the emergence of a wider social procurement practice.

To investigate social procurement and how this gives rise to a new type of actor, their work practices and roles, 17 interviews with 21 individuals working with employment requirements were conducted. The interviews were carried out by one of the authors of this paper between May 2016 and February 2017. The interviewees were chosen due to their experience from working with employment requirements, so they were able to provide insights into the ongoing development of employment requirement practices. To start with, interviewees were identified through industry press, websites and from open seminars. The interviewees were selected based on them being commonly regarded by the community of construction procurement in the Swedish construction sector as important players for the future development of social procurement and employment requirement practices. Using a snowballing sampling technique (Flick 2014), an additional set of interviewees were identified after being named as relevant in the interviews. Since employment requirements in procurement is a new organizational feature this technique to identify interviewees was useful because it enabled access to interviewees inside organizations.

The interviewees had diverse backgrounds in terms of education and previous work experiences. Most interviewees were either engineers or business administrators; others were social workers, or former construction workers, legal counsellors or teachers. The interviewees could be sorted into three key categories of organizational functions: (1) (project) coordinators, (2) sustainability specialists/managers and (3) procurement specialists/managers. The interviewees also represent different types of businesses, both public and private, including construction clients, contractors, architects, and the Employment Agency. Henceforth the interviewees will be referred to by their work title and personal code (see Table 1).

The interviews were semi-structured in order to create interview flexibility (Kvale 2007), opening for follow-up questions. The interview setting was characterized by informality and openness providing the interviewee, the narrator, great personal freedom and choice to choose which story to tell. This was deemed important given the to date scarce research

**Table 1.** Information on interviewees' roles and organizational functions.

Professional role	Organizational function	Individual codes
Coordinator (C)	Employment officer, CEO, business developer, project leader, project manager, head of development	C1–8
Sustainability expert/manager (S)	Sustainability manager, process leader for employment requirements, CSR manager, development strategist for social issues	S1–8
Procurement specialist/manager (P)	Procurement manager, head of procurement, strategic procurement officer, purchasing officer	P1–5

**Table 2.** Examples of interview questions for each interview theme.

Interview theme	Examples of interview questions
1. Personal work experiences related to employment requirements	What is your experience of employment requirements? When were you first introduced to the concept of employment requirements?
2. Perceptions on one's own role	How does a typical work day for you unfold in relation to employment requirements? What drives you to work with employment requirements?
3. Interrelations with other actors	Who are you closest colleagues that you can discuss and brainstorm about employment requirements with? What role do they have? Where do you find inspiration and guidance about employment requirements?
4. Values and characteristics prescribed to the role by the organization	How has your organization organized the work related to employment requirements? What formal policies are in place? Who drives the work with employment requirements?
5. Future prospects of the role	What are the challenges for you and your work related to employment requirements in the short-term and long-term? How do you think your role and work with employment requirements will develop in the future, both within your organization but also in the wider construction sector?

on employment requirements. Although open in character, the interview questions build on a literature review and document study on employment requirements (for a detailed account see Troje and Kadefors 2018), and a general aim to study organizational effects from these, such as new roles and practices. The interviews focused on new practices related to employment requirements and the interviewees' role to support these practices. The interviews covered the five main themes described in Table 2. Table 2 also shows key interview questions connected to each interview theme.

The interviews lasted between 45 min and 3 h, were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then organized and coded in a software program for qualitative data, NVivo, to enable a systematic review of the data. The interviews provided detailed and contextual insights into the everyday work life situation of the interviewees.

The data collection followed an inductive research approach, while the analysis was more abductive, where the data in an iterative process were analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework reciprocally focusing on; (1) employment requirements as part of a wider social procurement practice, and (2) the emergence of new professional roles and work practices. Thus, the data analysis was informed by the theoretical framework, but the data collection was not. First, the data were organized according to the five interview themes listed above. After this initial inductive coding, which was useful for understanding a new

phenomenon (Edmondson and McManus 2007), empirical excerpts were thematically analyzed, guided by the theoretical framework on professional roles and identities to find interesting patterns in the data. The theoretical framework provided a structure allowing us to move between the particular and the shared common elements in the stories. This enabled a theoretical examination currently lacking in research on employment requirements. In order to increase the validity of the analysis, coding was conducted by both authors in a two-step process; first individually and then jointly, so as to synthesize interpretations of the data (Flick 2014).

To receive feedback on preliminary results and the direction of the research, a reference group session was conducted after the eighth interview, which helped to increase the reliability and secure the relevance of the research (Flick 2014). The reference group consisted of representatives from different construction sector organizations, including clients, contractors, building consultants, architects and governmental support organizations, e.g. the Employment Agency.

After a thematic, empirically driven and iterative analysis guided by the theoretical framework, three main areas emerged that relate to the new role within the construction sector working with employment requirements in procurement: the "employment requirement professionals (ERP)". These themes relate to (1) how these professionals define their role, (2) how they frame their professional identity in relation to a social sustainability and (3) which work practices



they have adopted. The focus on how ERPs frame their professional role and identity (how they perceive their professional self) and their work practices (what they do grounded in their conception of their professional self), help bridging between levels of analysis; individual, organizational and societal (Alvesson *et al.* 2008), and thus better understand complex and unfolding relationships between self, work and organization which is of relevance for the subject of this study.

Adopting an explorative qualitative research approach has enabled us to identify social relations between people working with employment requirements, to capture the intricacies of the interviewees' working life (Flick 2014) and to provide insight into beliefs and behaviours of actors (Silverman 2013) working with employment requirements. The approach is suggested as particularly useful when studying a scarcely researched phenomenon (Edmondson and McManus 2007) like employment requirements and social procurement.

This research is part of a wider national research program with a focus on procurement for sustainable innovation in the built environment. The authors' membership in this program, that holds a network of both researchers and industry representatives, provides an arena for continuously verifying the currency and relevance of the research. Moreover, this study is part of an ongoing research project where data is collected continuously. Insights from data collected in Autumn/Winter (2018/2019), although not analyzed using the theoretical framework of this paper, cohere with claims made in this paper. Thus, at this point, an additional analysis of ERP roles based on this new data would not bring further evidence to the discussion.

## Findings

To better understand the emergence of a wider social procurement practice and employment requirements, the empirical reality as lived by ERPs is framed through stories and narratives. The findings will show how the interviewed ERPs mediate between contrasting interests when they create new social procurement roles and practices; how they enact different approaches to promote social sustainability, how their roles are formed by multiple and reciprocal lines of actions, and how they make sense of who they are and what type of work they engage in (professional identity).

## *Walking the line to shape new social procurement roles and practices*

The number of people who work with employment requirements within the construction sector in Sweden is still quite low, and most of the ERPs work alone or as members of small internal networks. Although the interviewees have quite diverse backgrounds in terms of education and previous professional experiences, three different types of professional roles related to social procurement were identified. First, the coordinator, who creates space for and manages coordinating activities within and across organizational boundaries. The coordinators work with employment requirements either full-time or part-time, sharing this task with other duties like administrative tasks, business development or working with recruitment in general. Second, the internal sustainability expert/manager, who has been assigned to focus on employment requirements as part of an overall social sustainability frame, sometimes together with other sustainability areas such as ecological sustainability. Third, the procurement manager/specialist, who mainly works with procurement, but has been assigned responsibilities related to employment requirements as part of this area.

For the interviewees, many of their roles were new and often both instigated and shaped by themselves. Many had proposed the need for the role or were assigned the role as an extension of another, as a sustainability manager (S4) explained: "I have created this role as a sustainability manager, [the need for a role] was my suggestion and a seed I planted within the organization". The interviewees also described how they develop their own role as new responsibilities are continuously added; such as, mastering new management tools, establishing collaborative work processes, or drawing the outline of requirements for the people they would like to hire. In many ways, maintaining and developing the role has been an ad-hoc process, largely influenced by unexpected incidents that need immediate care, such as the large inflow of refugees to Sweden in 2015. This was an event termed "the refugee crisis", described by the interviewees as a trigger that put the limelight on employment requirements and created a sense of urgency to handle these issues, and thus the need for a professional role to manage it. Many of the interviewees also feel that they have to go beyond their formal role descriptions and to collaborate with people they usually do not collaborate within construction procurement processes in order to fulfil their responsibilities. An employment officer explains:

It's about finding other channels than the ones we might have, to provide opportunities for the contractors (...) to thereby establish new contacts which I can use (...) We take that extra responsibility when it comes to employment requirements so we can support the contractor as far as we can (...) just because it is employment requirements we want to help a bit more. (employment officer, C7).

This act of stepping outside the normal working routines also includes contacting local football clubs in order to find potential employees, spending off-duty hours reading about social procurement initiatives and initiating discussions with multiple stakeholders to exchange knowledge.

Because implementation of employment requirements is a multi-party practice, there is no unified view within the construction sector regarding where the responsibility of employment requirements should be placed. Currently, the responsibility lies either within a specific sustainability function, within each individual construction project, within the purchasing department or even externally at the Employment Agency. Unexpectedly and despite the fact that employment issues as well as corporate social responsibility (CSR) generally relate to human resource (HR) activities, none of the organizations the interviewees represent has placed responsibility for employment requirements within an HR function. Instead, some of the organizations have deliberately placed it within a business development function as a strategic move to make it integrated into the organization's core business. A development strategist describes:

It was a strategic choice not to label it [employment requirements] CSR. We have instead chosen to place it within a business development [frame] (...) because we [the Company] should offer sustainable solutions to all our clients, in every business deal. (development strategist, S2).

Similarly, a sustainability manager (S4) said that "it's not only about pulling your weight, it's also about business development. There is commercial value in this, that's why we do it". Further, one interviewed process leader for employment requirements (S3) emphasized the long-term perspective, saying: "this [employment requirement initiative] should just continue, and this is not a project, it is core business, because we see it as long term".

One contested responsibility concerns the follow-up of results from employment requirement measures in projects. Either the interviewees said that follow-up is less important at this stage, since activities of employment requirement implementation must be established first, or they claimed that this is someone else's

job. The notion that the follow-up is someone else's responsibility originates from disconnected strategic and operative practices, where employment requirements fall somewhere in-between, as stated by a development strategist (S2): "we try to find a balance, to find a suitable level for engagement, and then find other ways in which we can help the projects to realize what they want in practice". Since many of the interviewees primarily work on a strategic level with employment requirements while at the same time recognizing the operational and practical issues involved, several of them expressed a need for their organizations to complement with operative support to individual construction projects in addition to the strategic and educational work they are expected to perform within their formal job description. Although they become involved in operative tasks, they currently feel they lack time and resources to do both. A sustainability manager (S8) said that:

There has to be a competent person here [in the company] who actually asks the question "how do you (contractor) plan to solve this? What are your difficulties? Why aren't we meeting you (contractor) halfway? Can we help?"

Much like the diverse roles and background of the ERPs, and due to the ambiguous organizing of employment requirements, the knowledge domain connected to employment requirements is undeveloped. For instance, a clear national, government-sanctioned definition of what employment requirements should entail is missing, and many of the interviewees perceive a lack of national support, which makes their work problematic to legitimize within their own organization. A sustainability manager said: "it's impossible to understand that there is non-existent national support when the government says it's such a gigantic issue" (sustainability manager, S7). The interviewees explained how learning is often informal, ad hoc and difficult to transfer between projects: "every new procurement is like a new mountain to climb. Sometimes it's very difficult to learn from one project to another" (business developer, C5). In the absence of commonly shared practices and routines, one project manager (C3) referred to this type of learning as "walking in the moccasins to understand the process".

### ***Professional identity and the virtue of personal engagement to promote social sustainability***

Considering the diverse background of the interviewees and the sometimes lonely and unclear role they have within their own organizations, the need for a

personal driving force is frequently emphasized. Thus, the interviewees' personal commitments and engagements are often stated as crucially important for progression in their work. A process leader stated:

80% is about people who are personally committed and who believe in what you do, and then the strategic elements are 20%. Because if you don't have people who are passionate about [employment requirements] (...) then it won't work, we will not succeed. (process leader, S3).

Similarly, a sustainability manager expressed that:

Social sustainability is a lot about engagement, and you must never underestimate that. Joy, engagement and value-based initiatives, you must never kill that (...) So it's about supporting the organization towards a form of formal enthusiasm, a quality-assured engagement. (sustainability manager, S7).

Connected to their personal driving force working with employment requirements, based on how the interviewees describe themselves and their personal views, three different types of identities can be discerned. These identities emerged from the data analysis and were not something that was discussed with the interviewees.

First, there are what we name the *idealists*, who describe themselves as good and caring society builders, who contribute to a larger social system of public welfare, who drives to help individuals by offering meaningful employment opportunities so they can create a better life for themselves, which would also benefit society as a whole. Many interviewees give voice to a non-choice situation, saying that they feel driven and obliged to do their part of the work in helping those who are less fortunate in the job market, just because they have the power as large clients and/or contractors to do so. One project manager (C8) stated: "it's silly not to help, because we're in a fantastic situation where we have that power, (...) to change someone's life. It would be silly not to use that [power]"; similarly, a process leader (C6) said "... for the people we engage in, for them we create opportunities and they get some power over their own life (...)".

Second, there are the *problem solvers*, who are triggered by the complexity of and uncertainty involved in implementing employment requirements. They are driven by the idea of finding a "recipe" that makes employment requirements commercially profitable. The interviewees often talk about the root of their personal engagement in working with employment requirements; for example, that they are driven by their own personal interests of being a problem solver, as two sustainability managers put it: "we are problem

solvers, and that's good, because we are never afraid to get involved with things that are difficult" (sustainability manager, S7), and "I'm damn curious (...) I see myself as a problem solver and someone who drives development" (sustainability manager, S4). The interviewees also emphasized the extraordinary work tasks related to employment requirements as inspiring: "we are ordinary employment officials who thought it would be a fun thing to do something besides the [ordinary] work tasks we have in the office" (employment officer, C4); "it's a fantastic mission to try to find a model where those coming as refugees could join the labour market" (process leader, S3).

The third identified category is the *pragmatist*, who are the least represented among the interviewees. The *pragmatists* are committed to employment requirements due to political decisions and/or company policies. Being focused on reaching a goal and getting the job done in a practical, matter-of-fact manner there are few sentimental values in their work, which is dominated by a drive to perform the work in a good and rule-abiding manner, as expressed by a procurement manager (P5): "when it comes to employment requirements, those requirements come from the municipality, from a political level. Then it trickles down into the organizations, and then we simply have to deal with them".

When matching these identities with their professional roles, we can find the idealist among the sustainability experts/managers and the coordinators, while none of the procurement specialists describe themselves in the way that would place them in the idealist category. The problem solver identity can be found among all types of professional roles, while the bureaucrat is only found among the procurement specialists. There are also a few interviewees who seem to enact both the problem solver and the idealist identities, and who talk about their role and work tasks from both perspectives.

Besides the social identities, many of the interviewees emphasised the personal rewards of working with employment requirements, either from a sense of self-fulfilment in filling an important space within the own organization – as expressed by a development strategist (S2): "suddenly I am the only one among 11,000 employees who knows something about something" –, or in helping others:

When you see the people, who get the opportunity to do an internship, and succeed to go all the way into an employment, you get so much positive feedback. To see their joy when they gain employment (...) So for me it's enough to see their joy, and it's something I find amazingly fun to be able to help with. (project manager, C3).

### **Conjoining operational, educational and co-creational work into a practice**

The interviewees describe their daily work in a similar manner, even though they have different professional roles and backgrounds. They indicate a processual nature of their actual work tasks as they use many active verbs, which roughly fall under three interrelated categories: operational, educational and co-creating work.

Although the intention is that the ERPs should work mainly on a strategic level, they, due to an organizational immaturity around employment requirements, also become involved in *operational work*, where they directly solve problems and ensure that work flows smoothly to ensure that employment requirements can be practically implemented. As a project leader described (C1): “I’ve tried to make it as easy as possible, by coming with suggestions, and templates they can simply cut and paste [from]”.

The *educational work* mainly concerns agenda-setting and convincing people of the importance of employment requirements. One of the issues ERPs must deal with is to communicate information and share knowledge about employment requirements to employees in their organization and to external stakeholders. In doing so, they address the challenge of making employment requirements understandable and applicable for employees working in different hierarchical levels and/or within other professional roles. This is described by one of the interviewees as follows: “one task that is important for me is to make sustainability understandable and tangible, both externally for our stakeholders, and internally” (sustainability manager S7). The interviewees are thus extensively engaged in educating colleagues, management, construction workers, partner organizations and other external actors such as clients and suppliers. When the interviewees talk about their role as informants, they use words like “teacher” or “gardener” to emphasize their work mission. Teacher is used to describe themselves as messengers of top-down information, stating that they “are out [there] educating construction

workers (...) I meet so many people in the company because I teach so much, many, many thousands of people every year” (sustainability manager, S7).

The gardener metaphor is used to illustrate the third category of tasks, in which they engage people in a bottom-up and continuous learning process through *collaborative and co-creating work*. One sustainability manager (S7) stated that “you have to grow people, and it takes time to grow competence”; as another interviewee put it, “it’s so important that [employment requirements] are promoted in the right way, that a seed is planted” (sustainability manager, S4). In the co-creational work, collaborative space across organizational boundaries is created to develop competencies and new practices. Due to the ERPs being alone in their role and often having to split their attention with other administrative procurement or sustainability-related issues, many of the interviewees explain how they collaborate, and often co-create, with others in order to overcome some of the complexities created by employment requirements. One sustainability manager (S7) explained: “I believe in knowledge, to give people tools, because you own what you’ve been part of creating, and what you own you take responsibility for. You will never let go of what you feel responsible for”. Co-creation is thus highlighted as important daily work for the ERPs: “we do this together, we hold hands and we have done this [employment requirement initiative] together with ‘Organization X’ (...) and we do this jointly because together we can reach out” (development strategist, S6), and “if this is going to be social sustainability, meaning long term, then we must have everyone on the train and they must sit in the same carriage” (process leader, S3). The interviewees said they create bonds with other actors across organizational boundaries, often with people they have known from previous shared work experiences, or with clients or contractors. For example, one interviewee, a CEO (C6), referred to his personal “knowledge alliance” as a source for inspiration and knowledge. [Table 3](#) summarizes the work practices of the ERPs.

**Table 3.** ERP’s operational, educational and co-creating work.

Operational work	Educational work	Co-creational work
Solving targeted problems	Agenda-setting	Facilitating and orchestrating meetings between different actors and professional disciplines
Doing your due diligence	Fighting rhetorically against misunderstandings and fears	Talking with people
Ensuring that things get done	Convincing others of the value	Inspiring courage into others to try different things
Providing comprehensive solutions which are easily adopted	Selling the concept	Unfolding “hidden” organizational initiatives
Supporting	Educating	Planting seeds
Providing tools	Explaining	Growing people and competences
Coordinating	Introducing people to the concept	Breaking barriers
	Supervising	
	Concretizing the concept into practice	

## Discussion

To add empirical and theoretical knowledge to the field of social procurement as well as to social sustainability the aim of this paper has been to investigate how “employment requirement professionals” (ERPs) define and populate a role within construction management. This involves how they promote a *social sustainability* agenda, how their roles are formed, how they make sense of who they are and what type of work they engage in. Similar to what has been found in previous research (e.g. Sutherland *et al.* 2015, Murphy and Eadie 2019), the creation of a new professional role in relation to employment requirements and social procurement is seen also in the Swedish construction sector. In the case of employment requirements and social procurement, the role holders promoted the role to the company and filled it with substance. It was found that the roles and their included practices and tasks were developed in an iterative and ad hoc process shaped by emergent concerns, demands and incidents, like “the refugee crisis”, which corresponds to how Chan (2016) has described expertise as something incidentally created as new problems occur.

The in-depth investigation of the ERP role and its new work practices provide novel insight into a new type of role in construction that “walk the line” as intermediates between contrasting interests; in our case “hard” construction procurement and “soft” social sustainability. Although it was found that the role often was self-created and iteratively developed to align with both immediate and habitual needs, findings show – similar to what previous research has discovered (e.g. Barraket *et al.* 2016, Gluch 2009) – complexity and uncertainty in terms of role expectations and tasks with unclear boundaries and responsibilities. However, this complexity and uncertainty could hinder the establishment of a more distinct professional role. For the ERPs, the expectations on them had an in-built ambiguity where they had to juggle between personal expectations of proactive and strategic character and expectations from others that included acting as standby, emergency help to colleagues working in the various construction projects. Thus, the expectations reflected demands and pressure from others, which was particularly clear when the interviewed ERPs described how they had to navigate between conflicting formal and informal roles and responsibilities. As a consequence, they were on one hand torn between their long-term focus and strong personal engagement in “improving the world” and on the other giving time-consuming practical

advice to a vast amount of people, which led to undue pressure on them to fulfil their own expectations to perform strategic and future-oriented social sustainability work. Therefore, in absence of a formal ERP role, like the one implemented in Scotland (Sutherland *et al.* 2015) or North Ireland (Murphy and Eadie 2019), a hybrid role with unclear boundaries and responsibilities were formed. Ambiguity between formal and informal roles have been in focus in previous research, where it was found that professionals develop alternative identities to adapt to different situations (Gluch 2009), which could also be seen in the case of the ERPs. The existence of both formal and informal roles suggests that the ERPs, despite the freedom to define their own role, do not yet have exclusive control and power of their work (cf. Brown and Phua 2011, Styhre 2011). Without such control and power, it may be difficult for ERPs to create legitimacy for their role and for social procurement and employment requirements, i.e. the establishment of a social procurement practice is hampered.

Tensions caused by a mismatch of expectations has been discussed in previous research on environmental sustainability professional (Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema 2016), however for the case of the ERPs there seems to be less stress than for other sustainability professionals, indicating that the ERPs might perceive a stronger self-identity and sense of freedom to pursue their (personal) missions than the environmental experts. A possible explanation might be that employment requirements, although complex to accomplish, in the end, have local and tangible results, i.e. of setting people into work, to compare with intangible global environmental impact.

The notion that self, identity, work tasks and results thereof mutually influence one another is not new. Scholars have suggested that professional practice is closely tied with identity (Gioia *et al.* 2010; Brown and Phua 2011). Regarding how the interviewees described what they do, some shared patterns were identified and three types of identities were discerned: the problem solver that fix things, the idealist and society builder that helps people, and the pragmatist that creates templates and guidelines to cope with reality. Referring to personal characteristics, such as liking to solve problems, helping others, having a high degree of ethical conduct, educating and communicating expertise knowledge, are all virtues of professionals as described in professionalization literature (Styhre 2011). By being a carrier of social values, ERPs role functions as a meaning-creating device (Simpson and

Carroll 2008) that encompass the complexity of social procurement and employment requirements.

Another aspect that influences the ERPs ability to manifest social procurement and employment requirements as an established practice is their organizational placement within the organizations. A majority of the interviewees was placed in a business development department with a strategic intention in mind, which suggests that the issue more easily can enter a strategic agenda. However, it also means that the ERPs were detached from HR functions in the organization and that they will not get the necessary feed-back so that social procurement practices can be improved and organizational learning can be accomplished. Because employment requirements are so complex to accomplish, input from different practice domains like HR or procurement is important for the future development and establishment of both the requirement and involved procurement practices. Thus, the detachment from HR functions limits the opportunity for expertise knowledge domain to be created (cf. Chan 2016).

Looking at the different formal roles the ERPs hold, you could imagine that certain roles would be more associated with certain professional identities due to the nature of tasks prescribed to the role (Lynch 2007, Styhre 2012). Consequently, you could easily think that coordinators would enact the identity of a problem solver, as coordinators often handle people and projects (cf. the project manager role described in Georg and Tryggestad 2009), to bring people together and create a space for collaboration across organizational boundaries (cf. the liminal role in Karrbom Gustavsson 2018), thereby engaging in co-creational and problem-solving tasks. It would also be reasonable to assume that sustainability experts would enact the identity of the idealist, as it is likely that people who work with sustainability are interested in improving the social environment, might have an activist agenda and engage in educational work tasks aimed at “spreading the good word” of sustainability. Moreover, it could be assumed that procurement specialists would enact the identity of the pragmatist, as procurement is a bureaucratic practice, at least within public organizations, and that procurement specialists work with paperwork, laws and regulations and contracts, and thereby mainly engage in hands-on administrative work tasks. However, even if the interviewed ERPs in this study might not be fully representative of all ERPs, there were only a few cases where their formal professional role, identity and work tasks corresponded to the suggested connections above. In fact,

all types of identities could be found among the interviewees, irrespectively of their organizational function. Regarding work tasks, for example, the interviewees engage in all types of work categories (operational, educational and co-creational) to various extents (Table 3).

Moreover, not only did the interviewees engage in several types of work, similar to what previous research suggests for other types of professions, for example, accountants (Bévort and Suddaby 2016), the ERPs integrated multiple identities into their professional role. The reason for this is likely due to the undeveloped knowledge domain, unclear division of responsibilities, ad-hoc learning processes and iterative role development, resulting in a need to avoid lock-in effects. This may be inevitable and also necessary until social procurement and related roles and practices become more institutionalized and defined. Thus, both flexibility and the embeddedness of a variety of identities in their role is vital for the ERPs who must find creative ways to cope with the new and yet to be developed work tasks as well as to convince other stakeholders that employment requirements should be a legitimized procurement practice. However, identity and role ambiguity may at the same time cause fragmentation around employment requirements and thus diminish the establishment of the new practices rather than clarifying them. In addition, for the ERPs themselves, such an “identity split” may create stress and confusion of sense of self, with the risk of them leaving the position before gaining necessary status in the organization, which might counteract a long-term establishment of social procurement practices.

Looking at the work tasks that the ERPs engage in, the interviewees in this study shares many characteristics to what Barraket *et al.* (2016) referred to as intermediary actors and Karrbom Gustavsson (2018) named liminal roles. They are the experts in their organization; they diffuse practices within and outside of their organizations, work across organizational boundaries and shape, advocate and legitimize employment requirements. Considering the metaphors used to describe themselves and their work, by talking about themselves as gardeners, teachers, problem-solvers, etc., the ERPs might be building a new identity circled around the complex competence needs of implementing employment requirements and social procurement. In their own role descriptions, they inspire courage for change; they plant seeds and “grow people”; they educate and convince others of the potential of employment requirements, actions that could be associated with the idealist. They also ensure things get done, and

operationalize employment requirements and break barriers, which could be associated with the problem-solver. They also serve and provide support and comprehensive solutions, which could be associated with the pragmatist. In this way, the interviewees resemble what Abdelnour *et al.* (2017) called modular individuals, as they are able to adapt and wield these roles, identities and work practices in a strategic manner in order to create their role and fill it with substance, as well as to cope with their complex work related to employment requirements. It may be so that without this modular ability, new and complex concepts such as employment requirements and social procurement cannot become fully legitimized.

Important abilities among ERPs is therefore that they are communicative and pedagogical and that they can adapt their social sustainability arguments to different contexts and engage different types of actors in the work. Besides showing catching enthusiasm they use of their knowledge advantage when selecting evidence and creating arguments to influence others' actions. The latter might be overcompensation for their lack of shared educational ground. In addition, they are not the typical built environment professional; that is, they cannot relate to the idealized role of "someone that knows how to build" as presented in the literature (Löwstedt and Räisänen 2014, Styhre 2012) but still have to fit into that environment. As such, the ERPs must possess multifaceted skills in order to perform their duties and tasks properly, where social procurement demands much from someone who often is alone in their workplace to deal with such complex issues.

## Conclusions

Increased use of employment requirements creates both opportunities and implications for the construction sector and its actors, their identities, roles and work practices. For the "employment requirement professionals" (ERPs), the complexity of social procurement and employment requirements poses demands on their self-identity. The reciprocal relation between identity and work practices is in the case of ERPs influenced by, and also over-dependent on, personal driving force and motivation for working with employment requirements. This is a very inconsistent and fragile base to build a social procurement profession and serves as a loose ground to build a coherent practice for social procurement. Considering the immature knowledge domain, missing competencies among the ERPs, ad-hoc learning and difficult

knowledge transfer between actors, it is reasonable to conclude that there is no current established profession nor a distinct knowledge domain that includes social procurement and employment requirements; thus lacking a distinct domain of practice (cf. Barraket *et al.* 2016).

Nevertheless, the ERPs do create a professional space for themselves and have also become a rather well-established function within their organizations, working with the operative, educational and co-creative tasks. Moreover, they describe the new professional role and identity of the ERP as gardener and teacher, metaphors that indicate a proactive and projective take on the future development of the role. Not being able to rely on an established knowledge domain, many of the ERPs enact several different identities to cope with the complexities of social procurement and employment requirements: the idealist, the problem-solver and the pragmatist. Relying on a self-made adjustable role and an identity based on personal engagement might be easier than relying on one's previous educational or professional background and affiliation, especially as the ERPs collaborate and co-create extensively across organizational boundaries and need to master various types of influence tactics similar to what the staff professionals in Daudigeos (2013) study used. This finding is interesting, as it provides novel details what happens when an actor is unable to connect to the existing and expected role within their context. The findings show how the ERPs build their own tripartite space between multiple identities, multiple work practices, and multiple (formal and informal) roles, in order to get power and resources to drive social procurement practices. The need for this space may be one reason for why certain formal roles correspond weakly with what would be expected to be the related identity and work practice.

For practitioners, this paper may create an understanding of what ERPs' future professional role might be, potentially making collaboration and co-creation across organizational boundaries clearer. This could subsequently enable dissemination of practices (Barraket *et al.* 2016) and facilitate a broad establishment of social procurement and employment requirements. The paper also provides insight into the nature of the ERPs and thus go deeper than just acknowledging that they can enact several professional identities, also pointing out which identities they enact. An important question remains for future studies: what does this reliance on social identities mean for practitioners in their everyday work?

Regarding theory, the paper contributes to a deeper insight into the rarely investigated concept of employment requirements and social procurement. The findings provide a detailed account of who works with employment requirements, how and why they conduct their work and thereby unfolds how professionalization might be hindered due to issues with knowledge domains, conflicting demands on responsibilities, and ad hoc, iterative development of roles and work practices. The findings also enable a better understanding of how the introduction of a novel concept, in this case, employment requirements, influence work practices for different actors in the construction sector, and how professional roles and identities are shaped through these changing practices.

Future research should investigate employment requirements and their organizational implications by studying emerging on-site construction practices related to the implementation of employment requirements. Here, a path for future studies could be on conflicts from role fragmentation, where the case of ERPs could be compared to other professionals who – similar to ERPs – perform work at practice boundaries, such as social workers (Edwards 2010), environmental specialists (Mieg 2009, Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema 2016), partnering managers (Karrbom Gustavsson 2018) and BIM coordinators (ibid.). It would be of particular interest to study how ERPs redefine the boundaries of the field of construction procurement. For the future development of the role, it could also be interesting to further investigate the tension between formal and informal roles identified in the findings. For example, if the role becomes less ad-hoc and more prescribed would the ERPs feel more in control, or feel more constrained and be less agile to react to sudden events, like the refugee crisis? Future studies could also address some of the limitations of this study, by including actors that work on a more operative level, like the newly employed and the construction workers, unions, and other types of technical consultants. Such an extension would provide a more comprehensive picture of how employment requirements affect various actors in the construction sector.

When it comes to the future of social procurement, the ERP role may become even more inclusive and even more multifaceted considering the complexity of social procurement practices. To manage this, the ERPs may need additional support from their organizations and from the sector at large to help them define their role and to establish both sustainable procurement practices and roles. However, organizations in the construction sector should ask themselves whether

they are changing their practices enough to fully accommodate employment requirements, or if they are hiring a new type of professional, like the ERPs, as a quick fix and “social-washing”. Also, the wide-spread lack of understanding for and knowledge about social procurement between different actors could hinder effective collaboration in the sector – something which the multiparty-activity of social procurement needs. As long as there are practical uncertainties about how to best conduct social procurement and conflicting demands and expectations forcing actors to adopt new social identities they are unfamiliar with, social procurement might never be fully institutionalized.

Looking forward, because the ERP role is yet to be defined, distinct or prescriptive, it may not only be learning from project to project which is achieved by “walking in the moccasins”, to cite one of the interviewees (C3), but the entire development of the ERPs’ role as well as the employment requirements themselves and included practices should be created through a continuous “walk in the moccasins”.

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