# Change in public facilities management organisations: The connection between emotions, humans and objects

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# CHANGE IN PUBLIC FACILITIES MANAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN EMOTIONS, HUMANS AND OBJECTS

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In this paper, the interest lies in increasing the understanding of how individual actors (both human and objects) within public facilities management organizations respond to the changes in their organizational context that is imposed on them, and how this is affecting their institutional work (IW). Data was collected through a workshop and interviews with officials from public facilities management organizations. Data was analysed using a framework that focused on the interaction between humans, emotions and objects. The findings present three types of objects, that have in common that they are used to reduce anxiety; past objects, used a 'soft blankets', future, imaginary objects used for concretizing the future perfect and current objects as shields to prevent 'reality' from being managed. The findings further indicate that humans believe that they conduct institutional work to create new practices in public facilities management organizations, when they are in fact maintaining current practices, for example by relaying on future imaginary objects to solve current problems. The paper complements previous research that has shown how individuals engage in creating new or disrupting old practices if the current situational order threatens their psychological wellbeing. Instead, it is argued that people engage in activities that maintain the institution of public facilities management when their psychological wellbeing is threatened.

Keywords: emotions, institutions, Public Facilities Management, sociomateriality

## INTRODUCTION

Research has focused much on technical solutions related to current challenges for public facilities management organizations (PFMOs) while less has been researched on organizational aspects related to current challenges and changes in operations (Nielsen *et al.,* 2016; Galamba *et al.,* 2016). Specifically, not much has been written on how human`s emotions and work practices are affected by the current situation and how this in turn impact practices and institutional work.

In Sweden, many public buildings were built during the so called 'million program' during the 60's and 70's. Due to the fact that local governments have lacked necessary overview of their building stocks as well as the organizational capabilities to manage them, there is now a large amount of buildings that need to be managed: the vast majority of these need extensive renovation (Jensen and Due, 2008; Hartmann *et al.,* 2018; Junghans 2013). In order to manage this need for mass-renovation and in some cases even replacement of buildings, PFMOs need organizational change. This

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change includes new organizational arrangements, both between PFMOs and organizations they collaborate with, as well as changes within PFMOs' own organizations. For example, PFMOs in Sweden are moving away from organizing their operations focusing foremost on facility management to become 'project-based organizations', responsible for both facilities management, extensive re-building projects and new construction. At the same time, PFMOs are facing increased demands on sustainability, financially sound operations and increased collaboration with stakeholders. Thus, today's public facilities management is placed within an increased complex organizational context in which individual actors (such as facilities managers and facilities strategists) need to 'travel' between different organizations levels to a larger extend than before (Gluch and Svensson, 2018) together with managing several different logics and perspectives in practice (Svensson, and Löwstedt, 2019).

Research has indicated that there is not enough flexibility in many of the PFMOs to combine these different perspectives (for example energy efficiency and financial aspects in renovation or renovation and new construction); instead some perspectives are overrunning others in practice (c.f. Thoreson 2015). Moreover; research has also pointed toward that the institutions connected to PFMOs are hard to change (Andrews and Johnson 2015). Hence, many PFMOs do not meet the criteria for a healthy organization, i.e., organizations that have the capacity and ability to, in a flexible manner, meet the changing demands impost on them (Schein 2013). Within such organizational, individuals are likely to experience feelings of anxiety and stress.

The transition that PFMOs need to go through (and in some instances has begun) can be viewed as an 'institutional change', since the underpinning ideas on how PFMOs are operating will need to change/ is changing. In this paper, the interest lies in increasing the understanding of how individual actors (both human and objects) within PFMOs respond to the changes in organizational context that is imposed on them, and how this is affecting their institutional work (IW). To understand the practices connected to institutional change, the research stream on IW highlights different types of intentional actions taken by individual actors in relation to either creating, maintaining and/or disrupting institutions (Lawrence *et al.,* 2009). Following a practice-turn in research, the IW construct has provided an opportunity to extend institutional research to also include interrelations between materiality and institutions (for example by combining IW with sociomateriality) respectively between institutions and emotions (see overview in Hampel *et al.,* 2017). For example, emotions have been shown to be a powerful device for and in institutional processes and affect human actions (Friedland 2018).

In order to increase the understandings of how institutions are maintained (disrupted and/or created) within the built environment, it has been suggested that researchers need to pay closer attention to practices and to the IW performed by (all) the actors involved in a process i.e., both humans and objects (Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema 2016; Raviola and Norbäck 2013; Monteiro and Nicolini, 2015; Lawrence and Dover, 2015; Jones and Massa, 2013). A hand full of papers have investigated the role of objects in change processes within the construction management research. For example; in a study of a Swedish public housing company's energy efficient renovation process, Palm and Reindl (2016) found, by applying a practice theory framework, that existing technical infrastructure largely determined what issues came up for discussion at meetings, thus the technology itself was part of organizational processes and seen as a valuable player. Buser and Carlsson (2016) have highlighted the active involvement

of the house itself, during a renovation process. Gluch and Svensson (2018) highlighted how objects were part of the process to developed new organizational practices connected to new management practices in PFMOs.

However, while construction management scholars have focused on the effective means of acknowledging humans and objects inter-action in facilities management and renovation processes, i.e., focused on the value for accounting for all involved members of the process and their impact, they have not elaborated on the affective parts of such processes.

Informed by the theoretical concepts of IW (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) and the emotional sociomaterial practice perspective (Stein *et al.,* 2014), this paper aims to increase the understanding of the connection between humans, objects and emotion in PFMOs changing organizational practice.

## THEORETICAL FRAMING

Combining IW and sociomateriality entails focus on the entanglement between the material and the social in practice (Leonardi 2013). The view on sociomateriality underpinning the research in this paper is that of so called 'weak sociomateriality' (Leonardi 2013) that is based in a critical realist ontology. This means that a) objects are acknowledged as having a material agency affecting human practice (and the relationship with humans) b) the actions that stem from this relationship becomes the interest of study and that c) objects and humans exist prior to their mutual relationship. However, it is through their inter-action that a certain phenomenon becomes interesting to study. More, the weak perspective takes an interest in the broader social context in which actions take place and how this affects the interaction between humans and objects.

In recent years, emotions have become widely researched in organizations studies. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to emotions in relation to sociomaterial arrangements and IW; humans' intentionality is discussed purely in relation to goals and plans and emotions are not mentioned within the sociomateriality paradigm (Stein *et al.,* 2014). The emotional sociomaterial (practice) perspective alerts us to the idea that emotional practices are not only socially contingent but also materially contingent (ibid). Focus is on what humans (and objects) are doing when humans say they experience certain emotions. Thus, the theorising of emotions in this paper is inspired by Stein *et al.* (2014) who have elaborated on two approaches for including emotions in sociomaterial theorizing; one for 'weak' sociomateriality (based in critical realism) respectively one for 'strong' sociomateriality (based in agential realism).

Stein *et al.* (2014) introduces the concept of 'felt quality' of practice in sociomateriality research and thereby contend that; "context is not a neutral container, but an 'equipped context (Gherardi 2012 p. 174)". Thus, taking this into account means, for example, that the researcher is aware that negative emotions can stabilize around a particular sociomaterial assemblage and so make it extremely difficult for a productive practice to emerge. It also implies the importance to take into account the organizational setting and the emotions it brings with it. Moreover; emotions are treated as practices (i.e. something that we do rather than something that we simply feel as an afterthought of some even).

Some researchers have begun to include emotions into their studies on IW, however; most of them have been focusing on how humans deliberately use emotions to pursue their means (c.f. Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Others however have

acknowledged that human can act in certain ways, depending on their current emotional context. Voronov and Vince (2012), for example, emphasize the importance of paying closer attention to the interaction between emotions and cognitions of institutional maintenance, disruption, and creation. They postulate that agents engage in creating new or disrupting old institutions if the current situational order threatens their psychological wellbeing. In another study Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) noted that agents might engage in institutional disruption because they are 'dissatisfied with existing practices.

To sum up, combining an emotional sociomaterial practice perspective with an IW lens, provides a focus on and interest in the entanglement between the material and the social during times of change in PFMOs.

# METHOD

In order to explore how the current organizational context influence humans and objects IW ten interviews with officials from different PFMOs, involved in change work and organizations working with PFMOs were conducted, together with a workshop.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to 1 hour and was conducted either by phone, face-to face or through Skype. The interviewees were chosen through 'snowballing' asking previous interviewees for connections to other municipalities and organizations working with PFMOs. The interviews focused on how the individuals experience the current situation, i.e., mainly the issue with the large building stock in need of renovation and how their work is affected by both the change that has already happened and the pressure to continue changing due to this large building stock in need of measures together with demands on sustainability and financial sound operations.

The workshop was a whole-day event and was attended by nine practitioners from different organizations, either PFMOs or organizations working closely with such organizations, plus one researcher that specializes in facilities management (FM).

The participants at the workshop were divided into three groups in which they were to discuss different aspects of current challenges for PFMOs and relate to their own organizations: What are the conditions for the current transition? Which actors are involved in the transition, what do they do and how is their work changing? How are your current work practices affected by the current situations for PFMOS? The discussion was based on a conceptual model developed by Gluch and Svensson (2018) that envisions the different organizational levels of current changes in PFMO.

The process of data analysis followed an abductive reasoning, meaning a continuous movement between the empirical data and the theoretical frame of reference. The notes from the workshop together with extensive summaries of the interviews was read through several times looking for patterns. The data analysis was dived into two phases. Firstly, the context of PFMOs was outlined, and the feelings this context bring with it. Secondly, the work of humans and objects were summarised in the findings.

The objects that were included in the analysis were selected based on the following criteria: They were somehow connected to the current context of PFMOs; thus, they were either created, wanted or used in specific relation to current challenges. They

were also shaping the actions in relation to current challenges. The type of objects identified were also apparent in more than one organization. Thus, they were used, adopted and understood similarly in and by different organizations (c.f. Friedland and Arjalies, 2020). After the objects of interest were identified, their interactions with humans were analysed.

The term sociomaterial has most often been associated with technology (c.f. Jones, 2013). However, objects in this paper may be both tangible and non-tangible (meaning both a document, an IT-system and expressions/concepts are objects). They are 'a thing outside´ (the human body) (c.f. Friedland and Arjalies, 2020).

## Frame for Data Analysis

The frame for the analysis of the relationship between emotions, humans and objects was inspired by Stein *et al.'*s (2014) framework for understanding emotions for socio-materiality based on critical realism (table 1). In sum, there are three important concepts to consider when theorizing emotions in sociomateriality: Affect, emotion and emotionology (ibid).

*Table 1: Frame for analysis of emotions and the sociomaterial relationship (adapted from Stein et al., 2014)*

| (Conceptual) series of interaction between emotions, the material/objects and humans | Empirical observations |
|---|---|
| 1.Organizational affect (humans and objects) [1] | 1.Organizational situation in PFMOs generate increased complexibility |
| 2.Subjective emotion | 2.This complexibility in turn generates anxiety and stress |
| 3.Emotionology | 3."This organizational context is hard to manage; how can we deal with this? These negative feelings need to be reduced". "The complexity needs to be managed/simplified somehow". |
| 4.Material affect [2] | 4.The objects functions (in various ways) to reduce anxiety and simplify the messy reality |
| 5. Emergent felt quality of relationship between objects and the organizational context. | 5. "We need to do something that will help solve our problems…." |
| 6. The type of institutional work conducted and the implications for the institution of PFM[3] | 6. Practices maintained. |

## Empirical Setting and Context

The organizations and the individuals within them in this study have not come equally far through the change process. Some individuals had experiences from organizations that had been trying to implement new working practices whereas other hade only begun to change their work practices. Yet other had not begun to change at all but had witnessed the change in other organizations. However, what the participants had in common was that they all felt that there is greater complexity imposed on PFMOs, with increased collaboration and increased timelines for planning. Moreover; both during the workshop and interviewees, it was mentioned that people experience stress and anxiety due to current (organizational) changes in PFMOs. The organizations and the individuals within them in this study have not come equally far through the change process. Some individuals had experiences from organizations that had been trying to implement new working practices whereas other hade only begun to change their work practices. Yet other had not begun to change at all but had witnessed the change in other organizations.

For organizations that had begun to take action and comprehensively "do something" about buildings from the million program this had resulted in a need for increased cooperation between organizations as well as within the organizations;

"… For example, a project manager who would now be able to handle massive projects with lots of relationships with the contractor and tenants and everything. I discovered that these people were beginning to fall apart. Sleep problems, depression, those kinds of issues. If you had been a project manager at a school before, you have to change the roof…. these are manageable quantities and known processes. But now it started to be about a hundred million and about 15 different groups to be coordinated, there are architects involved and then comes the politics and scream and then the company management that requires reports because now this is important… and by tomorrow you have to have a report on this etc. This in turn led to strong frictions between the various organizational units " (CEO, Private FM organization/ specialized in renovation of the million programs)

This complexity and organizational uncertainty in turn created anxiety among the individuals within PFMOs.

> For an organization that has not prepared or has done this before, it is a crisis. Crises are about people as I see it. I see now how, I notice this anxiety that exists… many have clear anxiety… (CEO, Private FM organization/ specialized in renovation of the million programs)

Several PFMOs have gone from being a 'service' function to become active stakeholders in planning and decision making regarding both current and future public premises.

Within this new organizational situation, three type of objects distinguished themselves and will be presented below.

## FINDINGS

### Three Type of Objects That Work to Decrease Anxiety

*Object as a 'soft blankets' to rely on - The usage of past objects for new situations*
The current challenges for PFMOs creates a need to develop new practices and routines in several different areas. Once the organizations had managed to act and create new work practices and plans for one problem area, these plans were used for other areas. According to one of the participants at the workshop, (head of schools, public FM organization): The "ventilation-investigation" (a brief summary of the work that was done with ventilation measures) later was referred to in plenty of other occasions; "that you can read in the ventilation investigation" became a common expression to tackle diverse issues. The object can be seen as a functioning "soft blanket", and in moments of uncertainty it is easier to lean on this rather than to create more new practices/reports.

*Objects as a shield - The usage of 'phrases' to avoid facing the truth*
In several PFMOs, there are many buildings from the million program that are in need of extensive measures. One reason for why so little has been done with the facilities from the million program is according to one of the interviewees that the "label" itself has functioned as a mental barrier: "There is so much that needs to be done within them (the buildings in bad conditions), especially for the housing companies with million programs, and it is like the housing companies have made regular changes in many other areas, but when it is called million program it is almost like you dare not move. Then it becomes like a barrier." (Facilities Management, private FM

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organization, specialized in renovation of the million programs). Thus, the sweeping expression "million program" have prevented actors from thoroughly investigate each building. Rather measures in these areas have been postponed for the future. More; according to the interviewees it has become "praxis" to lie for oneself by referring to that the "million program" is to extensive and money consuming to even bother about. The anxiety and mental barrier prevent the actors from seeing the truth as it is. However, in reality though, several interviewees, claim that the variety is large between different areas within the million programs, and even within the same are in the million program housing areas. "All areas have their challenges but also their qualities". The interviewees conclude that the areas are not as bad as many thinks.

According to one of the interviewees who had experience form several PFMOs there is a tendency for the boards of municipal housing companies to 'pretend' to be in control. "Rather than acknowledging the truth, people state that: "we are working with this issues" - hence another sweeping expression. Once you get to ask a bit deeper, 'working with this issues' usually meant discussing the problems, not doing anything in practice".

Some also mentioned that although the creation of new concepts, such as 'strategic facilities management' initially can be used spur enthusiasm and optimism these can also be used to "hide behind"'. In this way, organizational members can overtly claim that they are using a certain concept, however in practice the practices they are adopting are not in line with the ideas behind these new concepts. Though stating that they are working according to these concepts help to claim both themselves and the managers /organizations.

*Object as concrete vison of the 'perfect' future - The usage of future objects as a concretization of the future perfect*
Solution for current challenges, including increased collaboration, were often put somewhere in the future, when certain things would be in place, that do not exist today. As one example; new educations were put forward as one solution to manage renovation of the million program: "we need to start a three- year education in order to renovate the million program?", a project manager from a private CM company asks his group rhetorically at the workshop. While there might be a need for new competencies to manage current challenges, this way of reasoning might lead to no real action in practice, and people wait for this program to become reality rather than acting in the present.

Also, the need for new "(IT)- systems" in order for strategic FM to become reality, was a common solution to frame the solution to current issues. However, what such system would include was not clear: "A lot of people talk about the need for a "new system" in order for PFMOs to be able to manage the million program, but it is very difficult to know what content is intended?" was a common reflection at the workshop. "While waiting for these systems many other things become "locked up"" says one participant (Head of FM of schools, Public FM organization). So, while not being able to work with certain issues due to waiting for these IT solutions, the belief was that once these new systems are in place "everything will get in order". Discussing and relying on this future system calmed the humans in the present and it appears as if they felt they were productive in discussing these systems. However, in practice nothing changed.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The increased complexity and organizational uncertainty in PFMOs create anxiety among the individuals within PFMOs. The urge to manage these negative feelings lead people to use different objects in their institutional work. Objects and humans interact and together maintain current practices. The findings present three types of objects and how they are used to pursue this; past objects, used a 'soft blankets' and future, imaginary objects used for concretizing the future perfect and, current objects as shields to prevent 'reality' from being managed.

It appears as talking about a future IT system calms the actors in the present and make them feel as if they have accomplished something. However, in reality nothing has happened hence practices are maintained. Likewise; using 'empty' phrases such as "we are talking about it" made people feel as if they were doing something constructive, but they were in fact avoiding doing real change in practice. These findings indicate that humans (may) believe that they are part of creating new practices in PFMOs, and are agents for change, when they are in fact maintaining current practices. Moreover: these findings provide insights into why organizational practices in PFMO are hard to change (c.f. Andrews and Johnson, 2015), by showing how actors engage in practices that maintain institutional practices when their environment become fragmented and difficult to comprehend.

Complementing previous research that has shown how humans engage in creating new or disrupting old institutions if the current situational order threatens their psychological wellbeing (Voronov and Vince, 2012), and/or engage in institutional disruption because they are 'dissatisfied with existing practices' (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010) it is shown here how humans engage in activities that maintain institutions when their psychological wellbeing is threatened. The stories that this paper present shows that emotions affect humans in ways that are not always obvious and makes humans do things that have different consequences than was intended, in this case the maintaining of public facilities management practices. Thus, the humans did not use the emotions (in this case anxiety and stress) (c.f. Greenwood and Suddaby, 2005) rather the emotions were part of the context, that in turn affected the humans and the inter-action between humans and objects (c.f. Stein *at al.,* 2014).

In order for PFMOs to become 'healthy' organizations (c.f. Schein, 2013), that do not produce anxiety, it is essential that managers are aware of the different processes that are going on, that prevent change from happening and that, in the long run, produces more anxiety. Managers need to help people to face the 'reality' as it is, and the research presented in this paper can help them to discover and pay attention to the type of strategies humans use, together with objects. By lifting the functions of the objects, the present study advances the understanding of how humans and non-humans together enact institutional outcomes (Raviola and Norbäck, 2014, Monteiro and Nicolini, 2012), in this case maintaining current practices. The present study highlights the function of the objects for humans in PFMOs and the affective aspects in these processes, thus adding to Buser and Carlsson (2016) and Palm and Reindl (2016), expanding the view on objects role and function. In this paper it was researched on how anxiety and stress lead to actions related to the maintenance of institutional practices. However, within the institutional change that PFMOs are subject to, there are also other type of IW conducted and other types of emotions present. For future research it would be interesting to investigate how and if other

types of emotions in the context of changing PFMOs is both present and how they are affecting actions.

In this paper, the data was collected through talk that was converted into text; either at the workshop or by interviews. For future studies it would be interesting to collect other types of data. For example, one idea could be to follow/shadow a human or an object to be able to observe the emotions first-hand.

The paper has increased the understanding on organizational change in PFMOs by exploring the relationship(s) between IW, objects and emotions and highlighted how emotions derived from a certain context influences humans IW and their inter-action with objects. As such, the paper opens the black box of the relationship between emotions, humans, objects and institutional work (c.f. Stein *et al.,* 2014).

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