

## Professional identity and anxiety in architect-client interactions

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## Abstract

Large-scale construction projects increasingly have powerful and knowledgeable clients as project owners with whom professionals, such as architects, must interact. In such contexts, clients may have a significant impact on the constitution of a coherent and stable professional identity. Based on qualitative interviews with 50 architects across four large multidisciplinary professional service firms (PSFs) located in Sydney, Australia, supplemented by ethnographic observations, this article explores how architects constitute their identity in interactions with clients. The findings led us to conceptualize professional–client interactions in terms of two overarching discursive strategies deployed by architects in attempts to manage clients that are powerful and knowledgeable: *best for client* and *best for project*. We illustrate the anxieties that architects experience and suggest that attempts to secure professional identity may result in (re)producing an enduring sense of anxiety with unintended consequences for project outcomes and organizational performance.

Keywords: architects; professional identity; clients; discourse; identity work; anxiety

## **Introduction**

The concept of identity has enabled management and organization studies (MOS) researchers to observe and address a range of individual level issues associated with particular occupational roles. Significantly, researchers suggest that identity issues may affect professionals' performance within organizations. For example, van Marrewijk et al. (2016) argue that identity (being American or being Panamanian) was a major determinant of project outcomes in the new Panama Canal Megaproject. Nonetheless, despite this pioneering contribution, the different ways in which identity is performed are under-explored by scholars in construction management (Brown and Phua, 2011; Phua, 2013). As Liu and Walker (1998: 211) point out, this is an important omission because 'behaviour of the project organization (at the macro-level) is the aggregate of the project participants' behaviour (at the micro-level)'; thus, individual-level constructs can play a crucial role in the evaluation of project outcomes. The significant contribution of this article accords with the suggestion of Brown and Phua (2011) for the need to conduct more empirical work that is subject to sociologically informed theorizing on identity issues in construction management research. We do so by exploring how architects working on large-scale construction projects constitute their identity in interactions with knowledgeable and powerful clients. In this article, we adopt a discursive interpretive approach (Heracleous, 2004) to highlight the significance of client interactions on the constitution of professional identity. In so doing, we demonstrate the importance of 'identity issues' operationalized at the individual level of analysis for construction management debates (Brown and Phua, 2011: 83).

Based on 50 informal, open-ended conversational interviews with architects gathered during an eighteen-month ethnographic study of four multidisciplinary professional service firms (PSFs), we argue that professional-client interactions increasingly underpin how professional

identity comes to be constructed. We demonstrate that interactions with clients generate significant anxieties for professionals that may not be resolved through identity work (Brown, 2017), which can have negative impact on professionals and organizations.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on professional identity with a focus on the formation of architects' identity during formal training and its mismatch with contemporary multiorganizational contexts (Dainty et al., 2007) in which architects are increasingly engaged (Caven and Diop, 2012). This is followed by a brief overview of the central role that clients play in today's professional service organizations. We then outline how disparate studies illuminate ongoing anxiety in the workplace. After presenting our methodological and analytical choices we investigate the identity work of architects interacting with increasingly knowledgeable and active clients. We discuss the identity anxieties generated in client-interactions before concluding with the broader implications of our study for construction management research.

### **Professionals in contemporary practice**

In early work on professions, autonomy and self-regulation were seen as the defining characteristics of professional identity (Thomas and Hewitt, 2011; Brown and Coupland, 2015; Robertson et al., 2003). Historically, the provision of professional services was characterized by an 'asymmetry of expertise' in which the client was reliant upon the expertise of the professional (Abbott, 1988: 5). As such, there were expectations of how professional work should be conducted, bound by codes of conduct and the expert authority of the professional (Muzio and Ackroyd, 2005). The term 'collegiate control' positioned professionals as more powerful than their clients (Johnson, 1972). By contrast, 'patronage' described situations in which clients defined their own needs and the manner in which they were to be met by the professional (Johnson, 1972). For example, the stately homes and

palaces of the Renaissance (Lytle and Orgel, 2014) were built to realize a vision that the patron might have but which the architect delivered. The patron provided resources and a brief but typically did not presume to have project oversight.

Increasingly, professionals seek to exercise autonomy in complex project contexts involving a number of significant others, including clients, partners, contractors and regulators, delivering projects as a part of a broad-based collaboration (Dainty et al., 2007). In these multiorganizational contexts, powerful and influential clients (Dinovitzer et al., 2014; Gustafsson et al., 2017) participate in the development of ‘shared understanding, norms, values and practice’ with the professionals with whom they interact (Nikolova et al., 2009: 296). In the case of architects as one of the key players on construction projects, clients play an active role not just in terms of defining design and construction constraints but also in giving ‘advice, and approval throughout the process, without which the appropriateness of the services is threatened’ (Cuff, 1991: 171). In other words, powerful client organizations participating in large-scale construction projects influence professional practices (Handley et al., 2007), positioning professional-client relations as a key construct for understanding professional identity (Caven and Diop, 2012). In changing organizational contexts where multiorganizational clients are the sources of patronage, notions of autonomy in the control of professional work are becoming increasingly outmoded (McGivern et al., 2015). Particularly for architects, their ‘position in the “value chain”[...] has changed from being the client’s representative located between the client and all the other members of the project coalition to reporting to a project manager’ (Winch and Schneider, 1993: 469). Construction projects are thus well suited for examining the processes and consequences of identity work due to their transient, multiorganizational, multi-stakeholder contexts (Phua, 2013).

### *Architects identity*

Architects have traditionally led the design team and been perceived as the ‘spiritual leader’ of the project (RIBA, 2015). Despite reports that the profession’s authority over clients has been on the decline for decades (Waite and Braidwood, 2017), the training of architects continues to emphasize the role of individual creativity and aesthetic originality (Winch and Schneider, 1993) such that ‘[b]ecoming an architect is about becoming an artist, but a peculiar kind of artist who stays within certain boundaries’ (Cuff, 1991: 154). Design teaching in architecture schools tends to focus on theory and individual creativity unfettered by client demands (RIBA, 2015). Although Cohen et al. (2005) suggest that architects identify with three entangled roles, those of creative person, business person and humanitarian, stereotypical notions of the architect as a creative and passionate genius (Heynen, 2012) permeate the expectations of junior architects (Ahuja et al., 2019). As such, the ethos of design as distinctive self-expression is highly disciplined and ‘internalized in the professional socialization of many architects’ (Brown et al., 2010: 530). Architectural researchers have argued that the image of the architect-as-lone genius remains tacitly embedded throughout the profession (Wiscombe, 2006; Cuff, 2012; Pelkonen, 2012), reinforced by architectures’ highest accolade, the Pritzker Prize which continues to honor the hero architect unbridled by client needs or budgets (Heynen, 2012). Despite industry calls for business and finance to be taught as standard within architecture schools (Farrell, 2014: 29), design as creative practice continues to be the core of architects’ self-understandings. Thus, architects’ ‘ideal’ professional identity is preconfigured through specific discourses inculcated during long periods of formal education and socialization. For Murtagh et al. (2016: 69), architects ‘invest the self in their designs’ such that the outcomes of their design may be ‘experienced as an extension of the physical self’. In other words, architects derive a ‘sense of self-identity’ from design.

In the three decades since the seminal studies of the architectural profession (Blau, 1987; Cuff, 1991; Larson, 1993; Gutman, 1988), architectural practice has evolved ‘from the auteur to the multinational full service firm’ (McNeill, 2009: 3). In the UK, the role of architects in the construction industry has been the subject of intense governmental scrutiny (Egan, 1998; Farrell, 2014), broadly under the remit that ‘architects need to be part of the production process of buildings’ (Cohen et al., 2005: 777). In particular, the proliferation of large public-sector projects with multiorganizational clients has significantly altered traditional procurement methods, the contractor’s managerial role and increased the portion of design work being carried out by subcontractors, transforming the social context in which architectural design and production takes place (Latham, 1994; Jamieson, 2011). Moreover, increasing use of collaborative relationships such as partnering, joint venture, alliances and private public partnerships have replaced traditional procurement methods (Akintoye and Main, 2007). Typically, in these days of major city building projects, architects work in collaboration with large property developing organizations, government agencies and other complex client systems ‘comprising several different interest groups whose objectives differ, and may well be in conflict’ (Green, 1996: 156).

Traditionally, architects have sought to project a professional identity anchored in perceptions of design expertise and aesthetics. In this way, they aim to (re)construct ‘a continuous, stable identity’ (Gill, 2015: 308). Interactions with knowledgeable clients, however, provide both constraints and opportunities for the constitution of continuous, stable professional identity. This is because corporate clients’ expertise often matches that of the highly qualified professional. On the one hand, less time can be spent in negotiating and navigating the interaction of different world views. On the other hand, clients’ knowledgeability may lead to professionals’ practices and identity being questioned. When this occurs, professional identity becomes ‘mediated through a wide range of controls,

demands and expectations' (Knights and Clarke, 2018: 149). These externally interpreted controls either become adopted in a self-disciplining fashion, potentially entailing 'significant social and personal costs' (Haines and Saba, 2012: 122), or if resisted, risk the credibility of professional identity as contracts fail to be agreed. As Vough et al. (2013: 1050) point out, 'misalignments between what professionals perceive as the content of their professional work and what they believe others think constitutes professionals' work' can lead to emotional costs with broad implications, for both individual professionals as well their employing organizations.

### ***Professional identity, identity work and anxiety***

Professional identity is 'the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role' (Ibarra, 1999: 764). The content and processes of work are central to professional identity construction and thus, 'achieving alignment between professional identity and work is a fundamental motivator of identity construction' (Pratt et al., 2006: 225) associated with ontological security (Allan et al., 2018). Similar to the construction of professional expertise (Chan, 2016), the construction of professional identity is ongoing and involves *work* 'that underpins the identity process, [and] draws upon a range of meanings which individuals can identify with or resist' (Gill, 2015: 307). In this view, professional identity is 'formed in relation to significant others' through 'situated practices of language use' (Brown, 2017: 15). The emphasis is on dynamic relations between macro-level changes and individuals' discursively constructed identities (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). By focusing on identity work in situated social contexts, the importance of 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the



constructions' of self-meanings is highlighted (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 626), bridging macrolevel changes with their microlevel correlates.

Professionals' identity construction has been conceptualized as an ongoing struggle (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Ahuja et al., 2017) that may have unintended consequences, posing salient issues for construction management research. Ahuja et al. (2019), for example, found that for junior architects employed in PSFs, identity work may lead to a sense of disillusionment and the constitution of a dejected professional identity. Others have noted the 'unintended downstream consequences' (Caza et al., 2018: 901) of identity work such as, self-doubt (Beech, 2008), anxiety, and heightened insecurities over maintaining an elite status (e.g. Gill, 2015; Collinson, 2003; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Sturdy, 1997). Notably, emotional attachment to the expert identity of the professional may lead to acute anxiety 'about meeting the challenging expectations necessary to sustain their [professionals'] sense of self' (Gill 2015: 320).

A more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of professionals that lead to anxiety, cynicism and burnout is timely because studies have shown that a high number of construction professionals (e.g. engineers and project managers) suffer from ongoing anxiety (Haynes and Love, 2004; Lingard, 2003). For example, an occupational stress study in the construction industry found that nearly 70% of construction professionals suffer from stress, anxiety or depression with 'conflicting demands' identified as one of the main causes (COIB, 2006). As De Silva et al. (2017: 488) argue, '[t]he construction industry has long been recognized to be a stressful industry, due to its complexity' and 'many professionals including project managers, architects, engineers and quantity surveyors have to work under pressure'.

Taking into account the critical role clients play in today's professional service organizations, professional-client interactions provide a suitable context for the study of anxiety in the workplace. Despite a spate of studies examining the roles and relationships of the various professions in the construction industry (e.g. Caven and Diop, 2012; Wade et al., 2017), 'construction industry researchers tend to oversimplify the role of the client' (Cherns and Bryant, 1984: 177; Havensvid et al., 2016; Green, 1996). Understanding the influence of client interactions on professionals working in the construction industry is important because identity challenges generating anxiety can have significant implications for individuals' wellbeing and quality of life (Ashman and Gibson, 2010). On an organizational level, such anxieties can lead to loss of productivity, increased employee turnover and loss of talent, while at the societal level, mental health issues caused by anxiety have significant financial implications (Collinson 2003; Gill 2015; Knights and Clarke 2014). Building on these insights, we examine the identity work of architects as they interact with increasingly knowledgeable and active clients. Our study reveals how architects seek to address the challenges they face in their interactions with clients and to give meaning to the work that they do.

## **Data and Methods**

In this article, we draw on semi-structured open-ended conversational interviews conducted during the course of 50 architects' daily activities to focus on how professional identity is constituted in interactions with clients. Of these architects, 28 were male and 22 females. Two participants are renowned architects who have won several professional accolades and hold prestigious positions in professional associations and universities (see Table 1 & 2 for participant information). The interviews were conducted during a broader ethnographic study of four multidisciplinary professional service firms, over an eighteen-month period between

July 2015 and December 2016, in Sydney, Australia. The interviews took place at the interviewee's place of work and ranged in length from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. On average, each interview transcript had a length of 7000-9000 words. The interview data presented in this paper covered a spectrum of architects that ranged in professional tenure from 5 to 40 years, all of whom were engaged in large-scale construction projects. Table 2 shows the years of professional experience of the architects.

### **Table 1 & 2 about here**

Prior to the interviews assurances of anonymity and confidentiality were provided and informed consent secured. All respondents were asked to describe the types of clients they engaged with in their daily work routines. While we prompted the respondents to provide accounts of their work as well as their experiences and interpretations of client interactions, the open-ended nature of conversations gave these architects opportunities to reflect on interactions with clients. Our aim was 'to stimulate active narrative production, intentionally provoking interviewees to articulate and reflect upon their position' [here professional identity] (Hodgson et al., 2015: 749) with respect to interactions with clients. The interviews enabled us to 'situate the observations in the broader temporal and spatial context' (Groleau et al., 2012: 655) and provided a 'setting for stimulating professional identity reflections' (Reed and Thomas, 2019: 5).

The analysis of our data involved several interrelated stages in order to develop appropriate themes and advance insights about the ongoing tensions that individuals faced in negotiating professional identity in their interactions with clients for, as Breakwell (2010: 6.3) states, 'people are normally self-aware and actively monitor the status of their identity'. Taking a discursive-interpretive approach to identity work (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Brown, 2017)

which ‘focuses on individuals’ active construction of identity in social contexts’ (Pratt et al., 2006: 237), we shed light on the ways in which architects perceived client interactions in relation to their professional identity. As Caza et al. (2018: 891) explain, ‘[d]iscursive identity work is comprised of what is verbalized and how it is verbalized’ through ‘narratives, stories, dialogues, and conversations as a conduit for identity work’. Discursive approaches have been increasingly deployed in construction management research (Sherratt et al., 2013; Ness, 2010) providing new insights into how the identities of professionals constructed through their stories and narratives shape material practices (e.g. Sergeeva and Green, 2019) and have an impact on the wellbeing of professionals.

Data were analysed using an abductive approach (Peirce, 1934: 171) in which ‘abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis’. First, after an initial review of the data, we open coded both for the challenges and opportunities the architects experienced in their interactions with clients. These orientations were mapped by going back and forth between relevant literature and empirical data (van Maanen et al., 2007). The key theoretical concepts we drew upon as we coded the data included professional autonomy and control (Abbott, 1988); patronage and the role of the client (Johnson, 1972); the active construction of professional identity in social contexts (Pratt et al., 2006) and the role of identity work in mediating challenges to identity (Brown, 2017). We then synthesized in a ‘descriptive yet comprehensive fashion the experiences that participants discussed’ (Petriglieri et al., 2018: 7). The common themes that emerged across the four firms in the accounts of the respondents were first, the identity challenges architects experienced in their interactions with knowledgeable clients and second, how these challenges were having an impact on their self-views and their responses to these challenges. Further analysis led to the aggregation of these descriptions into two overarching discursive strategies that architects deployed, simultaneously, to manage their clients. These were, *best for client* and *best for project*.

Surprisingly, our data showed that these strategies generated significant and ongoing anxiety. In presenting our analysis in the following sections, we sought an approach that would be suitable to demonstrate some of the contextual richness of our data such as illustrative stories.

### **The Architect–Client Conundrum**

Architects' accounts of their work reflect exogenous changes that have had a significant impact on architectural practice, crystalizing the salience of knowledgeable and sophisticated clients that have now become a permanent feature of architectural work in PSFs. In our data, despite the participants being based in large 'design' firms led by well-known architects, the artistic and aesthetic priorities of architects, that is, professional values (Bos-De Vos et al., 2016) 'to have a design that we are proud of' (senior associate, Firm 3) were often misaligned with clients' priorities and views on architectural work as a technical service. The strong desire to uphold design priorities on large-scale projects involved considerable personal struggles for participants:

they want to start building...and we're still developing the design...that's how a lot of the problems start...then it feels like we're playing catch up...they build so fast...things go up overnight...clients just don't get it. (project architect, Firm 2)

For some, the 'constant battles' with clients' priorities, often concerned with speed, costs and area of lettable space, versus architects' professional values led to disappointments over their chosen career:

we [architects] insist upon aesthetics...any excuse to do something interesting...but clients have other priorities... that's stressful.... that keeps me up at night. (senior associate, Firm 4)

When discussing their interactions with clients, respondents described their clients as, ‘experts’, ‘sophisticated’, and ‘savvy’. For example:

[our clients] are sophisticated developer types...you know like they have...MBAs from Harvard. (senior associate, Firm 1)

[our clients are] all experts [gives example] they have 12-15 people [during feasibility study phase] who are all experts, geo-techs [geo-technical engineers], specialist contractors, structurals [engineers] and such like. (project architect, Firm 2)

Dealing with complex client systems on large scale projects was often described as ‘complicated’ and had a number of implications for architects’ identity construction. As this renowned architect explained:

the client might range from an individual to a corporation to the public to the future generations to an entire government...and so understanding that and dealing with that... it’s complicated (renowned architect, Firm 1).

Despite the firms’ past achievements for ‘award winning architecture’, ‘innovative designs’ and the reputational capital (e.g. Bos-De Vos et al., 2016) that positions their work as a predominantly creative venture (Brown et al., 2010; Blau, 1987; Larson, 1993), architects felt ‘undervalued [by clients] in terms of what we [architects] can offer’ (senior associate, Firm 1). The main implication of client-interactions was the ongoing anxiety of having to:

constantly *justify* the role that you have [as architect]...you have to explain every [design] decision. (senior associate, Firm 3)

This situation is far removed from the ideal of professional autonomy and control (e.g. Abbott, 1988). Being constituted as a service provider in client-interactions stands in stark contrast to (simultaneous) claims of ideals, such as: ‘I think we’re [architects] the only ones in the project [team] that can visualize the whole [project]...from the big picture right down to the balustrade detail’ (architect, Firm 1). These comments highlight the disjuncture between the power relations that architects have traditionally enjoyed, as experts (e.g. Johnson, 1972) who can ‘visualize the whole project’, versus their inability to explain the value that they bring to the client. While many respondents were quick to point out that ‘clients don’t like the artist label they prefer to see us as technicians’, claiming the identity of an architect in large-scale projects is riddled with anxiety.

The increasing project orientation of architectural work as a bundle of services that extend over a long period of time, absorbing a large amount of resources and time, means that ‘getting the next job’ was often the central concern of senior architects. Yet, the firms devoted considerable time and resources to entering design competitions, that often came with a low fixed fee, ‘a stipend really’ (senior associate, Firm 2), that did not compensate the resources and hours spent. Design competitions were highly cherished because they were: (1) a relatively autonomous and self-contained endeavor; (2) did not involve clients and, most importantly; (3) were judged by a jury of esteemed peers. As such, even though providing a service to a client is the lifeblood of PSFs, unbuilt designs were highly valued for embodying the design and artistic values of architects. As Kreiner (2009) suggests, design competitions are both opportunities for gaining work and fame as well as for celebrating architects’ creative and aesthetic skills. Indeed, the results of competitions are widely published and reviewed in the architectural press. However, architects’ identity that emanates from ‘feeling proud of our work’ and ‘good design’ for the ‘public good’ (Duffy and Rabeneck, 2013), is

challenged by feelings of being misunderstood and undervalued by clients with different priorities leading to the experience of intense anxiety.

In the following, we explicate two overarching discursive strategies that architects deployed in attempts to manage relations with their organizational clients who increasingly influence the architectural design process. These discursive strategies; *best for client* and *best for project*, understood as ways in which [we] ‘describe ourselves and our work’ (Fine, 1996: 90) are related to architects’ self-views (identity) and not just what they do, as they seek to construct a sense of agency in interactions with clients. However, we find that anxiety is experienced through self-defeating attempts to preserve and stabilize a professional identity that appears incongruously out-of-date in contexts where architects have increasingly less autonomy in procurement and construction processes (Waite and Braidwood, 2017).

### ***Best for client***

In large-scale construction projects where clients are experts with objectives that are often at odds with those of the architects, respondents described what it meant to be an architect by positioning themselves as *endorsing* clients’ ideas. In doing so, architects signaled that they accept client’s authority over design decisions. Participants talked of endorsing design ideas initiated by clients as identity-affirming. As this respondent explains:

Clients will look to me for endorsement.....so we might say we’ve exceeded the height here and they might look at me and ‘[name] do you think council’s [regulatory authority] gonna go for that?’ and I’ll say I think these are the issues...or they’ll say, ‘[name] are you happy with the design?’ (director, Firm 1)



In these accounts, the respondents underplayed their autonomy because professional success and personal fulfillment derived from validations from clients since, ‘knowing that I did what’s best for the client gives me a great deal of well... personal satisfaction’ (project architect, Firm 4). When reflecting on their professional identity on such projects, architects sought to present themselves as valuable contributors to the project by *endorsing* clients’ ideas that helped clients meet their own needs (Johnson, 1972). Positioning the value of their services as *endorsing* design that may well have been client initiated, ensured that significant clients continued to rely on architects for advice. Notably, this discursive strategy provided external validation for professional identity since their clients were often described as ‘very challenging’. During fieldwork, the researcher observed a one-hour presentation to a developer-client during which several design options were presented. The architect explained the regulatory and structural constraints that had led to the architects’ ‘preferred’ design option, but the client was unconvinced and began to draw shapes on the section of the drawing that was being discussed. The architect later explained that this developer-client had trained as an architect, making him:

a good client but very challenging and [he’ll] come to a meeting with new ideas and almost turn the thing [design] on its head (director, Firm 4)

In this discussion the primary role of the architect was to listen to the client’s idea to alter the shape and form of the building by lowering the height while extending the lower levels outward, for which the client sought an endorsement from the architect.

Accepting that interactions with clients’ challenge architects’ identity was a key theme that emerged in the data:

sometimes you gotta accept that things through that method won't necessarily be the same as if you had absolute control and absolute decision [making] of design. (renowned architect, Firm 2)

Being able to endorse clients' design-ideas was one strategy architects deployed to address the erosion of their autonomy (e.g. turning 'design on its head') in interactions with knowledgeable clients. Additionally, respondents found themselves providing clients with constant *reassurances* 'as to why we're making those design choices...well mainly we have to reassure them...yeah lots of that reassuring.... that the design [decision] is what's best for the client' (director, Firm 1). Central to this understanding was the notion that architects were doing what is 'best for the client' despite working for clients 'that are not on same wavelength...I mean... in appreciating the value of good design' (project architect, firm 3). This kind of subterfuge, however, came with emotional costs, that is, anxieties triggered by having to do what the clients expect and require versus what architects see as most important. Indeed, this disparity was a significant source of anxiety:

The tension or the difficulty is just speed...the speed at which people [here, clients] want things resolved I don't think it's... it's not really possible to resolve design... well that quickly. (director, Firm 2)

These 'constant battles' to accommodate clients' ideas and expectations (here, speed and cost) versus designing something 'that works and is aesthetically pleasing' (director, Firm 2), generate threats for architects' identity that provoke considerable anxiety. For instance:

look... some clients don't really give a shit about architecture or buildings, in the case of [gives example] they [clients] were under pressure [by new regulations] to improve the building envelope...they didn't want to spend the money...but they needed us [for a building permit] so we're already undervalued to start with. (director, Firm 1)

Anxieties about being undervalued, prevalent throughout the profession are internalized by practitioners, because the clients ‘don’t care about architecture’ (director, Firm 1) *per se*:

I want to do good design but it’s a constant battle .... we don’t have time to think you know... I feel like a machine. (junior architect, Firm 2)

For this respondent, the harsh deadlines set by clients generate a great deal of anxiety expressed as a ‘constant battle’ in which delivering drawing packages to deadlines stymies his desire to ‘do good design’. Here, the respondent, feels ‘like a machine’ rendering the architect unsure of his competence in a fiercely competitive marketplace. This junior architect (Firm 3) had similar experiences:

so, you are trying to portray the importance of design but at the end of the day they [the client] say ... ‘can you just replicate that [propriety system]?’ that’s when you go Arhhh ... Grrrrr ...here we go ... so what the fuck am I doing?

For this respondent, the disappointment of having to replicate a propriety system (that is, product assemblies that can be bought) instead of providing the client with innovative design solutions generated frustration and anxiety about the work that he was actually doing. Similarly, this respondent questioned whether clients value their work at all, since original ideas were often completely overturned:

[client said] ‘we’re not building that we’re building this...I want you to document this... coz I’ve spoken to the [stakeholders] and we’re gonna sell them the bottom part of the building ...make enough money to pay for that [the top part]’. (director, Firm 2)

In these accounts, constantly having to reassure clients that architects’ decisions *are* what’s best for the client, that is, architects understand clients’ commercial interests, exacerbate anxieties that surround the precariousness of architects’ identity:

[we] have to obviously provide matrices that indicate that we've have looked at all the different issues ...you know, we're pushing the aesthetic, but you have to tick every other box to prove that the aesthetic doesn't rule over any of the other issues. (senior associate, Firm 3)

Here, by 'providing matrices' architects have to demonstrate the balancing of design innovation with commercial sensibilities that some respondents described as 'submitting to the circus' (architect, Firm 2). In these comments, architects have to establish not just that their design would stand but also that it would be affordable because design is often seen by clients as something 'expensive' and largely 'dispensable'.

In summary, despite arguing that they derive pride and satisfaction from *endorsing* clients' design-ideas and *reassuring* clients that architects' decisions were 'best for the client', significant anxiety is experienced in client-interactions. The reason is that 'design' has become a devalued currency since construction technology has advanced, such that product assemblies or packages can be bought (off the shelf) rather than designed.

### ***Best for project***

Part of affirming the architects' identity as a distinct player in large-scale projects was the notion that:

A good project [that] is well designed it's not enough just to make money on it...we do expect to make money we do...but I think if you put your name to things... you need to be proud of the project'. (senior associate, Firm 2)

In these accounts, respondents downplay their professional identity as businesspeople. Instead, 'good design' enables architects to be proud of their projects and is acclaimed as creative and innovative, emphasizing the conceptual quality of architectural work. Indeed,

respondents stressed that *reminding* clients that they are design experts and ‘this is what you hired me for’ enabled them to negotiate effectively with clients on difficult issues. For instance, this architect points out:

our role is ...giving the clients a bit more as an option to complete something they may not have looked at because their specialty is not architecture...and remind them that they can also participate [in project design]. (senior associate, Firm 4)

Here, the emphasis on reminding the clients to participate in ‘design’ is a means of regaining architects’ standing as experts. Similarly, another respondent explains:

well we...nourish them [client relationships] so ideas can sink in and could be developed...I’m constantly reminding the client... we look at the big picture...I mean what’s best for project. (project architect, Firm 1)

I think we should do what’s best for the project rather than any individual [client] so that’ll be the basis of the discussion... that’s how you get work in the long term...you act in [the] project’s interest not just the client’s interest, the *project’s* interest. (senior associate, Firm 3, emphasis in original)

Another way in which architects affirmed their identity vis-à-vis their clients was by being able to *persuade* clients that certain design elements (spatial and material) were crucial to the overall aesthetic design and thus, ‘best for the project’, despite being at odds with clients’ original expectations. For some, knowing that ‘we *fought* to get the best outcome [design]’ (architect, Firm 4), was a source of satisfaction. For others, subtly persuading clients to come onboard with new design ideas, that is, ‘being able to look at the big picture’ affirmed architects’ identity. These strategies were aimed at (re)establishing the architects as experts that clients relied upon (Abbott, 1988).

At the same time, respondents pointed out that their ‘commitment to the project design’ exacerbated anxieties about identity. The burden of constantly making identity-defining choices led to ‘feeling exhausted’, having a ‘loss of confidence’, ‘feeling insecure’, ‘worrying’ and ‘doubting myself’. The disparity between being who architects sought to be in the project process and who they were supposed to be, generated a ‘state of perpetual angst (anxiety)’ (Ashman and Gibson, 2010: 5). For example, following the observation of what appeared to be an hour-long argument, a renowned architect (Firm 2) later explained that:

we’ve had a lot of arguments...parts of the buildings are too high...and in the end, I looked at it and said we should lower some parts and not others which means they’ll [client] have less development ...and he [client] cares about the project enough to say ‘OK’ ...but then he’ll come back and say, ‘now find the floor space somewhere else’.

Here, the developer-client is someone who is clear about his objectives and imposed constraints, eroding the architect’s autonomy. By persuading the client that the architects’ design-decision was ‘best for the project’ the client, is more willing to defer to the expert judgment of the architect. However, this often meant fighting for the identity they claim:

now that [meeting] was a tricky negotiation... at the back of mind, I know we *fought* to get the best outcome [design]... so you design the option that they [client] will accept and then obviously you make that as best you ...I try to frame it that we’ve come at the best option for the...project. (senior associate, Firm 3)

In this account, the architect re-narrates the initially heated exchanges as a ‘tricky negotiation’, in which the architect worked with the client to find an option that the architect deemed ‘the best option’ for the project. In this meeting, a compromise was agreed between the client’s intention (to cut costs) and the architect’s intentions (design). In these accounts,

‘getting work in the long term’ was not simply a matter of satisfying clients’ requirements but rather giving the clients several ‘design options’ to meet their requirements.

A similar view is expressed by this architect (Firm 4):

the clients had to save [\$4 million] ...so we made lots of design changes...it’s not what we wanted but...we did it. In the end, they “found the money” ...so all that work...convincing the clients [that] this was the best option for the project ...was a good thing.

The effort of ‘nourishing client relationships so ideas can sink in’ (director, Firm 2) was also a source of anxiety because, ‘you have to remind clients all the time...that you’re not just dealing with aesthetics but that you have whole lot of experience built up from past projects which they might not know about’ (director, Firm 2). These accounts are riddled with anxieties about being devalued; clients cannot be persuaded of the value of architects’ services in large-scale construction projects. For example:

suddenly the [client’s] brief will change so [example] we got to [] quite a long way into the project [8 months] and then the brief completely changed but rather than saying ‘oh that’s a variation because that wasn’t the project we signed up to do’ we... just modified that...or started again or whatever [] ... they [clients] didn’t have the perception that design matters ...didn’t really want to pay for [our] design... didn’t care about [design] ideas they just wanted the building! (senior associate, Firm 4)

Similarly, this architect described how the constant changes they were asked to make throughout the project process caused significant anxiety:

They’re [clients] still making changes to what we’re doing after ...after 5 years...the buildings been under construction for almost 3 years [the project is almost complete].

Now it's been fitted out and someone's come along and said, 'oh we should do this'... We're about to hand over the project and they're still getting us to change things. I worry... a year from now someone will wanna change something... will they even come to us? (director, Firm 1)

The feeling of vulnerability was pervasive in the accounts of architects. This respondent was admitting he was anxious about whether the clients would ever be satisfied with the building design. Surprisingly, although architects were well aware of the sense of ongoing anxiety, they were unable to render their identity secure through identity work strategies and instead, seemed complicit in the inertia around identity change vis-à-vis their clients.

## **Discussion**

The contemporary construction industry context (Dainty et al., 2007) is transforming roles, responsibilities and work interactions that challenge the constitution of a coherent and stable professional identity. Moreover, professionals are facing a decline in public confidence regarding the value of their exclusive knowledge base (Vough et al., 2013; Duffy and Rabeneck, 2013). As Duffy and Rabeneck (2013: 120) explain, 'the success of architects depends on the value placed on their intellectual capital by various kinds of client, i.e. those who wish to build'. Yet, due to outmoded professional structures and the ever-increasing rationalization of procurement processes, 'the professional relevance of architects is declining as they have now become one of many professionals providing [design] services to clients' (Frimpong and Dansoh, 2018: 293). Studies conducted in the UK (RIBA, 2015), Australia (Ahuja et al., 2017), France (Caven and Diop, 2012) and other countries (Frimpong and Dansoh, 2018) confirm that marginalization of architects and the invasion of their professional role in construction projects is pervasive across different scales of engagement, from house building to large-scale projects. A recent report by the Royal Institute of British



Architects points out that, as projects advance, clients perceive architects' 'creative flair' or conceptual skills as a liability and may seek to replace the concept or design architect with a 'safer pair of hands' once the design development stage is completed (RIBA, 2015: 27).

Since identity is a central lens that individuals use to make sense of and enact their environments (Lepisto et al., 2015), such perceptions by clients serve to undermine the constitution of a stable and enduring professional identity.

### ***The influence of clients on professional identity***

All our respondents defined themselves as architects, regardless of their hierarchical position in the firm. As such, they took great pride in showing the researcher the projects they were working on as well as the awards that the firms had won. In accordance with Bos-De Vos et al. (2016) who suggest that architectural firms spend extra time creating aesthetic qualities for projects that do not necessarily add any value for the client or user, but rather contribute to the creation of professional values (such as, reputation and work pleasure), we found that architects constructed a positive identity from their innovative designs of large-scale public domain projects. However, we found that these architects seemed confused about how to define their identity since clients increasingly 'dictate to the architect not simply the services the firm is supposed to perform, but more to the point, the services the firm will be *allowed* to perform' (Gutman, 1988: 58). In our data, the confusion was expressed as anxieties related to feelings of being undervalued by clients.

We have demonstrated that architects deployed two overarching discursive strategies; *best for client* and *best for project* in attempts to manage the challenges generated during interacts with powerful and knowledgeable clients. By *endorsing* clients' design-ideas and *reassuring* clients that architects' decisions were 'best for the client', architects sought to present themselves as valuable contributors to the aims and objectives of clients. Yet, significant

anxiety due to ‘concerns about being devalued’ remained (Jensen, 2006: 97). In deploying the ‘best for project’ strategy, architects ‘saw themselves as helping to improve the built environment for everyone’ (Cohen et al., 2005: 791). Effectively, they were attempting to please the collective or ultimate client (Schein, 1997) thus, affirming their identity as experts that contribute to public good through the considered design of the built environment (e.g. Duffy and Rabeneck, 2013). In this sense, the data presents mixed views of architects’ identity. On the one hand, architects depict their position as one of change, as a profession under threat in an era characterized by increasing skepticism from knowledgeable clients. The changing client demands are seen to be triggering identity work for architects as they strive to manage changing relations of practice. On the other hand, in terms of generating a new identity, we found that ‘extant knowledge and practices [...] create mental blocks’ that may be constraining (Miron-Spektor and Erez, 2017: 9). It was as if architects refused to acknowledge that the changing nature of their work requires a shift in their professional identity. While it has been argued that ‘not finding opportunities to behave in accordance with one’s desired identity leads to changes in the salience of such an identity’ (Anteby, 2008: 204), our findings contradict this view. We suggest that architects’ attachments to particular notions of professional self (Collinson, 2003) seemed to reinforce rather than resolve anxieties in relation to powerful clients. Similar to lawyers acquiescing to the influence of clients on partner promotions (Gustafsson et al., 2017), we were particularly struck by the lack of critical reflection by architects. Researchers have noted that, construction practitioners’ ability to reflect on their expertise is ‘dictated by professional associations or discourse created within the construction industry and its legal and economic imperatives’ (Kanjanabootra and Corbitt, 2016: 573). We found the mismatch between the idealized professional identity inculcated in the long training and socialization of architects

and what architects actually do, exacerbated identity anxieties in client-interactions (Samuel, 2018).

Indeed, discursive constructions of ‘the client’ exert a great deal of influence on professionals’ sense of personal grooming, appearance and behavior (Becker et al., 1961). Displays of enthusiasm (Grey, 1998), emotions (Hochschild, 1983) and commitment (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Kuhn, 2009) become discursively constructed through interactions with significant others (Goffman, 1959). These discursive constructions provide justifications which, on the one hand, mediate tensions arising from ‘being a professional’ in contemporary contexts and on the other hand, constitute a professional identity that renders individuals governable, ‘[i]n a manner which feels like ‘choice’ (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000: 1168; Dick and Hyde, 2006). Considerable research in this tradition has foregrounded both the disciplinary effects of discourse (e.g. Alvesson et al., 2008; Gill, 2015) and the sophisticated agency of professionals in appropriating available discourses as they seek to reconcile professional identity misalignments (Wright et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2010; Pratt et al., 2006). Our discursive focus adds to a more nuanced understanding of the influence of clients in construction management research (e.g. Cherns and Bryant, 1984) by identifying the specific identity work strategies that architects use for managing active and knowledgeable clients on large multiorganizational construction projects. Our research also connects to broader discussions of expertise (e.g. Kanjanabootra and Corbitt, 2016; Chan, 2016) as an effortful accomplishment in constant flux, situated in everyday interactions and practice.

### ***Identity work, clients and anxiety***

Our research has demonstrated that interactions with clients (re)produce significant anxieties about the constitution of professional identity. Identity work has been conceptualized as a

‘precarious accomplishment’ laden with complex emotions such as anxiety, fear and self-doubt when established notions of identity are called into question (Beech et al., 2012; Beech et al., 2016; Gill, 2015; Knights and Clarke, 2014). Disparities between individuals’ actual and ideal self can trigger identity work that may not always *resolve* challenges to identity and thus may also be seen as ‘a double-edged sword, resulting in both positive and negative personal outcomes’ such as, (re)producing an enduring sense of anxiety (Caza et al., 2018: 900) and emotional exhaustion (Haines and Saba, 2012). Knights and Clarke (2014) argue that workers experience anxiety ‘because the self is fragile’ requiring the confirmation of ‘others’ for identity construction in the workplace. We extend these understandings by demonstrating that interactions with clients generate significant anxieties, that may not be resolved through identity work.

In the case of the architects we studied, this anxiety was not simply about losing the client but about the ‘dilution’ or ‘usurping’ of design ideas by clients and the effect this had in undermining ‘the autonomy upon which a dignified sense of [professional] self depends’ (Knights and Clarke, 2018: 149). These understandings are important, since anxieties as a condition and consequence of identity work (e.g. Knights and Clarke, 2014) have implications beyond identity. They extend to issues of productivity, with consequences for the organizations in which professionals are increasingly embedded (Caza et al., 2018: 900) as well as for mental well-being in the workplace (Ashman and Gibson, 2010). In particular, anxiety in the workplace can harm individuals’ well-being with significant financial implications for the wider society (Gill, 2015). In light of these understandings our study offers a rare glimpse of the anxieties of architects generated during client-interactions.

### **Limitations and future research**

While our in-depth study provides new understandings of how individuals negotiate professional identity in relation to clients, this is also a limitation. We have only examined architects working in large PSFs. Although researchers have suggested that professionals may choose to locate within large firms because of the superior monetary rewards and resources, this in turn may restrict the opportunities to enact a desired identity available to architects working in small firms or as sole practitioners. In particular, because architects work closely with other professionals in the fiercely competitive construction industry, they may be more susceptible to being bypassed by clients for whom alternative service providers are available. Through future research scholars could compare and contrast other professionals to highlight ways in which client interactions influence the constitution of professional identity. Second, the study has focused on shared themes that emerged from our data, rather than individual differences. Future research may for instance, investigate differences across gender and/or seniority to understand how these factors influence the identity work of professionals and the experience of anxiety in different work contexts. Future research may also explore how identity issues in construction projects influence professionals' interactions with other members of the project team.

## **Conclusion**

We have explored how one group of construction professionals – architects – manage their interactions with increasingly powerful and knowledgeable clients. Our analysis suggests that interactions with clients pose significant challenges to professionals' identity that can lead to ongoing anxieties. By adopting a sociologically informed, discursive approach to identity our research serves as a catalyst for construction management researchers to explore other 'individual level and socio-psychological constructs' (Phua, 2013: 176) and the implications for organizational performance and project outcomes. The conceptual framework proposed in

this study could be used to investigate the interactions of other project actors (e.g., contractor, engineer, and project manager) with clients as they may illuminate identity challenges and anxieties in diverse project actor relationships. Finally, these findings should find a significant place in the future of architectural education and professional associations in order to better prepare professionals for contemporary practice.

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Organization	Work undertaken	Number interviewed	Respondents
Firm 1	Transport, health, education, commercial, sports, residential, conservation, public realm	12	Renowned architect (1), Directors (2), senior associates (4), architects (3) Juniors (2)
Firm 2	Transport, health, commercial, sports, residential, public realm	16	Renowned architect (1), Directors (1), senior associates (5), project architects (4) Juniors (5)
Firm 3	Commercial, residential, retail, sports, education, defence	12	Senior associates (2), project architects (4), architects (4) Juniors (2)
Firm 4	Transport, residential, commercial, retail	10	Senior associates (2), project architects (1), architects (3) Juniors (4)
Total		50	

Participant	Professional tenure (yrs.)
<i>Director/Principle</i>	>20
<i>Senior Associate</i>	>15
<i>Project Architect</i>	>12
<i>Architect (licenced)</i>	>10
<i>Junior architect (not licenced)</i>	<5