What makes an "innovation champion"?

Introduction

In times of rapidly changing markets and technologies, organisations are forced to innovate and improve their products, services and processes (Bessant and Tidd, 2011; Van de Ven *et al.*, 2008). However, project–based firms struggle to innovate and transfer learning between projects, often having weak internal business processes (Blayse and Manley, 2004; Gann, 2001; Ivory, 2005). The presence of key individuals who "champion" innovations is frequently cited as important for successful businesses (Chesbrough and Crowther, 2006; Rogers, 2003), especially in the context of highly complex and risky construction projects (Leiringer and Cardellino, 2008; Nam and Tatum, 1997; Winch, 1998). In response to such needs, "innovation manager" or "innovation strategy director" job titles are commonly created (Cottam *et al.*, 2001). Naturally, a commitment from senior managers to facilitate innovative working environment is encouraged in organisations. Despite their important innovative roles in organisations, champions have received little attention and much of the research has been carried out without a sound theoretical base (Jenssen and Jörgensen, 2004). There is hence a rationale to obtain a deeper insight into what makes an "innovation champion" in the context of construction projects.

There has been an increasing interest in "innovation champions": who they are and what their roles are. Much of the organisational literature has focused on determining the individual characteristics of "innovation champions", based on personality inventories (Howell and Higgins, 1990; Howell *et al.*, 2005; Kelley and Lee, 2010), and these traits are usually treated as unitary, coherent and autonomous characteristics separable from social

relations and organisations. Such an approach remains "acontextual" and "atheoretical" in terms of lacking any explanation of how and why people present themselves or others as "innovation champions". Moreover, there is a growing recognition that social identity studies challenge such previous assumptions. From a social identity perspective, it is common to consider less stable aspects of identity and acknowledge dynamic, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory social contexts within which individuals work and function (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005; Gioia *et al.*, 2000).

Social identity has become a popular frame through which to explore a wide range of phenomena (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008; Ybema *et al.*, 2009). Social identity refers to an individual's sense of "self" or others within social groups (Alvesson, 2010; Brown *et al.*, 2008). The increasing interest in social identity stems from the argument that an individual sense of "self" impacts decision-making and future actions (Thomas and Davies, 2005). The formation of personal notion of "self" and others is seen context-sensitive and evolving, having impact on group and organisational identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Tomkins and Eatough, 2012). This paper reports on current research which suggests it may be appropriate to adopt a social identity frame of analysis to explain an "innovation champion" identity. Such an approach offers a creative and insightful way of understanding the "innovation champion" as a socially constructed identity on the basis of individual perceptions of "self" and others.

A conceptual model of "innovation champion" themes derived from the literature on social identity is proposed in the paper. The conceptual arguments developed are empirically examined through thirty semi-structured interviews with UK construction sector practitioners who have engaged with the Constructing Excellence network-type organisation

(Constructing Excellence, 2013). It is argued that practitioners engaged with the network align themselves with its aim and objectives, and socially construct their or others' identities as "innovation champions". As well as providing fruitful insights into practitioners' reflections on who "innovation champions" are, what they do and how they are recognised, the empirical research validates the thematic model of "innovation champion" identity. These insights enrich our understanding of how the "innovation champion" identity is formed.

The paper begins by reviewing current understanding of the "innovation champion" label in the organisational and construction management literatures. A social identity frame of analysis derived from the literature is then introduced, followed by a discussion of its applications to specific contexts. A model of "innovation champion" themes accompanies the discussion. A research methodology is then discussed, outlining the social approach taken. Empirical findings derived from the interviews are then presented, reflecting back to the reviewed literature and the social identity framework. The concluding section summarises the key empirical findings, and suggests potential practical implications and future research directions.

The "innovation champion" label

Organisational literature

There is an increasing interest in the literature concerning "innovation champions". Zahra *et al.* (2001) argue that chief executives are often recognised as "innovation champions" whose role is to take risks in identifying, refining and supporting innovations introduced by individuals, groups and units within an organisation. Rogers (2003) also define

"Innovation champions" as those actors who take an innovation on board, modify and "fit" it into a context, in comparison to "innovators" who are seen as actors who first come up with an idea. He acknowledges that the "innovation champion" label can be interpreted differently in various contexts. However, the underlying insights into who see themselves or others as "innovation champions" and for what purpose remain under-explored. This tendency is also evident in research by Jenssen and Jörgensen (2004) who discuss human and social capital characteristics of "innovation champion", arguing that it is necessary draw from several theoretical perspectives (e.g. resource dependency theory, network theory, agency theory, and personal trait theory). A champion is seen as:

"An individual that is willing to take risks by enthusiastically promoting the development and/or implementation of an innovation inside a corporation through a resource acquisition process without regard to the resources currently controlled."

(Jenssen and Jörgensen, 2004: 65).

Howell *et al.* (2005) also discuss personality characteristics of "innovation champions". Initially "innovation champions" were labelled by CEOs from companies, confirmed by interviews with these individuals. Personality inventories identify personality characteristics of these interviewees. While "innovation champion" is seen as a "socially desirable label", initially such a label was identified by CEOs, rather than individuals' own interpretations. Of further note is that the role of contexts in labelling "innovation champions" is not considered. Chesbrough and Crowther (2006) further contend that "innovation champions" interact with others in order to bring in outside technology into an existing product development. Büchel *et al.* (2013) and Häggman (2009) reinforce the role of "champions" in

the processes of introducing new technologies into organisations, receiving and exchanging confidential information with the team, but call for further research to explore these processes.

The "innovation champion" label has also received an increasing attention in studies of service organisations. This is evident in the work of Greenhalgh *et al.* (2004) who discuss multiple roles of "innovation champions" in service firms and broader social networks. These authors describe "innovation champions" in several ways: as "mavericks" who establish creative solutions to existing problems; as "transformational leaders" who harness support from other organisational members; as "organisational buffers" who create a loose monitoring system to insure that "innovators" are properly use the resources or as "network facilitators" who develop cross-functional coalitions within an organisation. While Greenhalgh *et al.* (2004) develop these conceptualisations, they call for further empirical research into how to identify, and systematically harness the energy of, organisational champions. From the perspective of professional service firms, Ivory (2005) and Lu and Sexton (2006) reinforce the role of owner-managers as the principal "innovation champions", but fall short in providing any further explanations.

Construction management literature

The role of "innovation champions" is increasingly emphasised in the context of construction projects. Nam and Tatum (1997) argued that decision-making tends to be centralised in construction projects which are commonly characterised by newness and large size. For construction projects, a single person at the top may act in different "champion" roles: as "technological champion" who carries an idea from the initial concept

through to development into a product or process; as "business champion" who provides a business framework for a technical idea; as "executive champion" who sponsors the idea at the highest level, using power to protect it, move it along and seize the opportunity to exploit it or as "integration champion" who orchestrates the efforts of various champions in various organisations involved in the project. Nam and Tatum (1997) reported that professionals involved in the innovation process recognised "innovation champions" as those who commit themselves personally to "push" a project forward, and usually are in "powerful" positions. The role of the "innovation champion" is linked with the entrepreneurial function, which includes risk taking, the provision of capital and the transformation of an idea into the operational status.

Winch (1998:151) argued that through collective actions a "system integrator" needs to be persuaded that new ideas add "value" and are incorporated into the system as a whole:

> "Innovations need champions. Ideas are carried by people, and ideas are the rallying point around which collective action mobilized. Unless the 'system integrator' is convinced of the merits of the new idea, and has the skills to incorporate it into the system as a whole, change is likely to be slow."

Possession, power and technical competence of "innovation champions" are seen as enablers to overcome the uncertainty and resistance to change in the sector (Blayse and Manley, 2004). Harty (2008) further argues that "system integrators" manage the transition of innovation from single instances to wider adoption within the superstructure of the

construction sector. Of particular note is that "system integrator" is a synonymous label attached to an "innovation champion" by these authors. However, the questions of how these identity labels become recognised and by whom are not explained.

Leiringer and Cardellino (2008) further argue that project members may self-promote themselves as "innovation champions" for particular target audiences. In other words, practitioners recognise themselves or others as "innovation champions" in particular contextual circumstances. Their argument is that an "innovation champion" may be seen as a socially constructed identity that is continuously re-negotiated in everyday organisational talk and texts. Bresnen *et al.* (2005) and Green (2011) reinforce that UK construction sector practitioners may depict themselves as successful "innovation champions" in particular contexts within which they operate. They enact (create) meanings in order to negotiate with social audiences to legitimise their identities. This stream of research calls for further research into the way practitioners self-present themselves as "innovation champions", and the role of context in shaping their personal images.

Social identity frame of analysis

This section of the paper identifies themes from the organisational literature on social identity that contribute to an "innovation champion" identity. These themes are discussed with the specific reference to how they inform an understanding of the "innovation champion" identity, and are presented in Figure 1.

Put Figure One here

Individual sense of "self" or others

Authors such as Alvesson (2010) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argue that social identity loosely refers to subjective experience and individual ongoing efforts to answer the questions "Who am I?" and "How should I act?". Experience is understood as beliefs, norms, meanings and interpretations (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). In portraying identity as fluid and fragmented, it is frequently argued that ambiguities and struggles are central to the social construction of identity:

> "One's personal identity implies certain forms of (often positive) subjectivity and thereby entwines feelings, values and behaviour and points them in particular (sometimes conflicting) directions."
>
> (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008)

Drawing from this perspective, it is proposed that the "innovation champion" is a subjectively constructed identity that can be examined based on individual perceptions of "self" or others within social groups. When individuals socially construct their or others' identities as "innovation champions" they may experience frustrations, struggles and sometimes contradictions.

Narratives about "self" or others

It is commonly accepted that personal identities draw on available social narratives about who one can be and how one should act (Brown and Phua, 2011; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Experience is constituted through individual narratives about "self", others and what has happened and is happening to them. People enact (create) meanings on the basis of their memories, present experiences and expectations from available social, public and cultural narratives (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011; Somers and Gibson, 1992). Currie and Brown (2003) adopt a narratological approach in order to understand how practising managers in UK NHS hospitals made sense of the introduction of a series of improvement interventions. Their study shows that senior and middle managers shared their different narratives in order to make sense of their identities. Individual identities are understood to be constituted by life narratives that actors construct during their lives. Of particular note is the observation that these self-narratives are both individual and shared. However, it is further emphasised that identities are not always consensually negotiated; in many cases they are more plausibly depicted as contested. Garud *et al.* (2011) reinforce that different actors can create different narratives to represent "unusual experience" informed by their identities, interests and values, but they do not specifically focus on "champions" of innovation. By "unusual experience" authors mean situations when organisations operate in environment characterised by disruptive technologies, new markets and transformational changes.

Although one may assume that people often share common meanings, there are often inconsistencies and conflicts within their narratives. Brown *et al.* (2008) draw insights from semi-structured interviews with members of staff at a small, privately-owned company in

Singapore. They demonstrate that micro-level narratives are mobilised in the context of individual identity constructions:

"Subjectively conceived identities are available to individuals in the form of narratives which position an individual in relation to the discursive resources available to him or her." (Brown *et al.*: 1037).

In particular, while shared meaning is created, subtle differences in individual narratives are evident. Each individual is concerned to construct a preferred (often positive) narrative of identity to themselves and others. This opens a possibility of accessing the narratives mobilised by practitioners who perceive themselves or others as "innovation champions". Drawing from the above studies, it can be argued that narratives are the primary means through which practitioners present themselves as "innovation champions" to others. To formulate individual narratives about "self" or others, people draw from past experiences, present circumstances and future imaginings.

Social context in shaping individual identity

Social context is highlighted as a strong influence on individual identity. Using the five articles on social identity construction as discursive resources, Ybema *et al.* (2009) argue that individual identities cannot be understood in isolation from social actors and institutions:

"…for the individual, identity formation involves processes of negotiation between social actors and institutions, between self and others, between inside and outside, between past and present."

The argument developed by these authors is that identity construction can be understood as a social negotiation process between "self" and others. Even when an individual constructs own identity he or she is embedded in socio-material contexts where individual thoughts and actions are shaped by other actors, work settings and broader social networks and institutions (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). Based on these assumptions, it can be proposed that social construction of an "innovation champion" identity is shaped by other actors, work environment and broader networks they engage with.

Several labels attached to identity

The literature suggests that people may have several socially constructed labels attached to identity, sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory (Gluch, 2009; Tomkins and Eatough, 2012). Alvesson (2010) suggests the following seven images of the individual identity identified in the research literature:

- Self-doubters: identities are viewed as circling around the anxiety, undermining identity constructions.

- Struggles: Identities are understood as a struggle, enacted in order to construct a self-identity that provides a temporal sense of coherence.

- Surfers: Identities are considered as processual and open in a dynamic world.

- Storytellers: The reflexive construction and re-construction of a narrative of identities.

- Strategists: Identities craft their sense of collective identifications that are then mobilised for the accomplishment of a personal and collective objective.

- Stencils: Identities are viewed as an effect of the operations of regulatory forces, aiming to replicate the dominant templates of being.

- Soldiers: Social entities such as organisations often made appealing through constructions of organisational identities.

The above distinction relates to how the individual is metaphorically understood in terms of identity construction. By providing an overview, Alvesson's (2010) work acknowledges that people may attach several labels to their own or others' identities, especially in the context of dynamic social conditions. Based on these assumptions, it can be proposed that practitioners may attach several labels to an "innovation champion" identity.

A process of construction of identity

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1165) define identity as a way in which individuals are continuously "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness". From this perspective, people may re-think and re-label their identities during their lives, as their beliefs, perceptions and social circumstances change. Individuals may re-construct their identities through contested and often conflicting narratives about their everyday experiences. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe identity in "processual" terms as a struggle, drawing upon an in-depth case study of a senior manager and the organisational context in which she works. They demonstrate a process of creating several, and often changing managerial identities:

"It is productive to take seriously a process of becoming of identities in

social and discursive contexts to which individuals relate themselves. We

suggest that it is a process in which individuals create several more or less

contradictory and often changing managerial identity (identity positions)."

(Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165)

It is hence important to acknowledge a process of constructing an "innovation champion"

identity, and a possibility of re-constructing or re-labelling identities in social and discursive

contexts.

In summary, an "innovation champion" identity can be understood as an individual

sense of "self" or others. Narratives about "self" and others are seen as primary means for

presenting identity, while ongoing struggles and ambiguities are also seen to be central in

the process of identity construction. Additionally, social context is seen as influential in

shaping an "innovation champion" identity, alongside complex, dynamic and uncertain

nature of contemporary social and organisational life. A process of identity construction may

be constituted by several, more or less, complementary or conflicting identity labels. This

makes identity constructions precarious and calls for a recognition and emphasis on

"processual" aspects of identity. Taking all these reference points together, a conceptual

model of "innovation champion" themes can be formulated (as presented in Figure 1). These

themes represent the frame of analysis of the interview material.

Research methodology

Data collection

The explicit aim of this research was to explore the extent to which a social identity

theory could explain how and why practitioners project their identities as "innovation

champions". Thirty semi-structured interviews with UK construction sector practitioners were conducted. The researcher aimed to interview practitioners who are interested in innovation, and how they socially construct their own or others' identities as "innovation champions". The research is based on practitioners' own perspectives and views. The selected sample was initially composed of "active" participants within Constructing Excellence - the UK construction sector's network-type organisation for driving the innovation agenda (Constructing Excellence, 2013). In alignment with Swan and Scarbrough (2005) networks are understood as rhetorical devices to enrol key professionals and to mobilise changes in work practices. It is important to recognise that "innovation champions" who are engaged with the Constructing Excellence network are also simultaneously 'active' in their own working organisations, there is a blurring of boundaries between intra- and inter-organisational relationships. A snowballing strategy was used to expand the scope of interviewees. By using this approach, some interviewees were not necessary directly engaged with the Constructing Excellence network. Hence, it can be argued that this research has broader implications.

The interviewees came from a range of different backgrounds with a diversity of core qualifications. Table 1 presents background information about interviewees.

Put Table One here

The interviews were one-to-one and were typically held in practitioners' offices. The duration of the interviews varied from approximately half-an-hour through to two hours. Most interviews were a little over an hour long. Indicative questions included the following:

- To what extent do individuals play a role in shaping the context within which an innovation can take place?

- What is your role in making an innovation happen?

- How does an innovation become recognised in an organisation?

- Are there any defining characteristics of an innovation champion?

- Does innovation become important in shaping identities?

The intention was to understand and explain how and why practitioners make sense of who they are and what they do. Particular attention was given to narratives of personal identities which the interviewees had mobilised spontaneously. The research sought to investigate the extent to which self-narratives of identities reflect social identity construction.

Data analysis

In the case of each interview, the adopted unit of analysis is a narrative of personal identity as mobilised by an individual practitioner. Across all interviews, the narratives are progressively conflated to provide a broad unit of analysis which focuses on a collective of narratives. There are variations in how researchers understand narrative through thematic analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). In one stream of research, narrative is seen to be restrictive in terms of referring to specific stories organised around characters, events and setting. The argument is that these are discrete stories told in response to single questions.

In another stream of research, narrative is considered to encompass large sections of talk and interview exchanges over the course of interview. The argument is that narratives in research interviews are rarely clearly bounded. Of further note is the explicit recognition that the interviewer plays an important role in the interviewee's storytelling (Langley *et al.*, 2013; Maclean *et al.*, 2011). When researchers collect data through in-depth interviews, they emphasise the importance of transforming the interviewee-interviewer relationship into one of narrator and listener.

The analysis of the interview transcripts commenced with a detailed reading of the transcripts several times over with a focus on narratives about identities. The researcher started by looking for patterns of meaning and potential interests in the interview data. The analysis involved a continuous moving back and forward between the entire dataset (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). The analysis of the empirical material involved coding the textual material. The coding used in the analysis reflects the themes presented in Figure 1. These themes recurred across the interviews, providing a framework through which to understand "innovation champion" identity.

Empirical findings

The empirical findings derived from semi-structured interviews are presented in this section, reflecting on the "innovation champion" identified themes.

"Innovation champions"

The empirical research indicates that practitioners project themselves or others as "innovation champions". Through the course of interviews, there is evidence of the way

practitioners socially construct the "innovation champion" identity. For example, some interviewees explicitly recognised themselves as "innovation champions":

"Some years back, innovation that I actively championed was the change of the method of excavation. I was introducing it and persuading people to start using it. By the time we finished, it was absolutely convinced."

(The design manager, Construction firm)

Retrospectively, the design manager saw himself as the "champion" of innovation. Of particular note is that the "championing" activity was associated with convincing other organisational members to start using the innovation. Practitioners, who saw themselves as "innovation champions", increasingly emphasise their feelings associated with the process of "driving" organisational changes:

"I have driven a lot of things in our organisation. If you make a chart when these things happen it would happen when I am bored, because when I am bored I want to push myself".

(The property services director, Independent social business)

Other interviewees did not necessarily see themselves as "innovation champions", but recognised other people as such. The group innovation knowledge manager from a building contractor firm identified the CEO as an "innovation leader":

"If people cannot "innovate", then they would phone me and say: "This is not working". So, it is down to me then to work on those processes and change it and understand why the problem is. As a culture, you have got a

prime person in the business as a "cultural leader" and a "champion". It goes to a chief executive board and our investors. Also it goes to people employed, down to their careers, down to their career development, training department. So, that is everyone's responsibility."

While the group innovation knowledge manager perceived himself as an "innovation champion" in the context of internal processes of change, at the broader level the CEO of the business was recognised as a "cultural leader" and "champion". Of further note is that CEOs of leading construction firms were often seen to play significant roles in shaping and establishing "innovation strategies". An important role of the CEO, who promotes an innovation in the organisation and in the sector, was reinforced by the strategic project director from a public infrastructure firm who claimed that:

"I think the chief executive has been an "architect" of the whole programme. His title was an "innovation strategy director". So, that is an organisation that saw innovation as something they needed to do as a "differentiator" in the market. He had a responsibility to promote innovation."

The CEO is seen as a "champion" of innovation whose responsibility is to promote innovation as one of the core organisational "values". The CEO is seen to play a significant role by establishing the innovation strategy in one of the leading infrastructure firm. The CEO from another leading consultancy firm saw the same CEO as an "impressive champion" of innovation:

"[Name] is impressive champion of innovation and improvement. He is

"walk and talk" if you like. His work is across the supply side. He is running

a big project there. It is a secret project company really. He is spending

enough money over enough period of time that he can expect to see a

return on innovation strategy put in places."

Storytelling ("walk and talk") was described as a particularly important behaviour, the "innovation champion" aiming to promote the innovation strategy across the supply chain and persuade business actors to follow his ideas.

In summary, the empirical evidence suggests that practitioners project themselves or others as "innovation champions", using particular vocabulary to construct their or others' identities. Different labels such as "innovation leader" and "cultural leader" were used by practitioners interchangeably, with an "innovation champion" often being seen as a person in senior position (e.g. chief executive board, investors) who does not just come up with an idea ("innovator"), but who initiates the process of "promoting" the innovation across organisations. These findings reflect the themes of an "innovation champion" as an individual sense of "self" or others which can be promoted through narratives and can be described by several labels (Figure 1).

The role of "innovation champions" in shaping the context

One of the questions interviewees were asked was the extent to which individuals play a role in shaping the context within which innovation can take place. Most interviewees strongly emphasised that individuals play a highly important role, arguing that significant

innovations in the UK construction sector originated from quite a small core of people who were usually in "powerful positions":

> "There have been some people who have really said: "We have got to do really something different" and really set about shaping and changing. But they were in a very powerful position because they had the money to force change, because they were commissioning buildings. And the government was struggling to do the same, but it never will because it is too bureaucratic. So, you do need people who are sort of "movers and shakers", who have sort of vision where they want to get to."
>
> (Manager, Leading consultancy practice)

In the above quotation the metaphor of "movers and shakers" was used to describe "innovation leaders" who have influenced the industrial changes. Ongoing struggles were emphasised in relation to the continuous changes in the construction sector. The head of business development and marketing from a specialist contractor argued that the function of senior managers is to pursue appropriate and relevant innovations:

> "I think senior management teams are key individuals because they are the ones who decide what themes they want our innovation team to pursue. They are the ones defining direction they want our innovation team to be moving in. So, without that input at the very early strategic stage from a strategic management team an innovation team it will be unforced without direction. There is a good chance of something which is not necessarily appropriate or relevant."

In the preceding quotation, senior management teams were not necessarily labelled as "champions", but described as key organisational actors who define the direction and decide what themes an innovation team should implement. This argument was reinforced by the business improvement manager from a construction firm who strongly emphasised that a senior person can be a "driver", a "blocker" or "neutral" towards innovations. The group innovation knowledge manager from a building contractor firm also highlighted the role of CEO in shaping the organisation:

> "Innovation becomes something that business does. I think the key thing what could damage it is if you have got a new chief executive who says: "We are not doing an innovation anymore. We are going to be risk-diverse. We are going to change the customer we work for". That could seriously damage the organisation. So, I think at the end of the day it all comes back to leadership and that would maintain innovation."

The preceding quotation emphasises that innovation can be sustained if there is a presence of an "innovation leader" who shapes the way an organisation operates. These findings refer to the the theme of the role of "innovation champions" in social contexts (work settings, circumstances and broader networks, as formulated in Figure 1).

Characteristics and types of "innovation champions"

One of the follow-up questions was to describe the individual characteristics of "innovation champions". The contrasting perspectives mobilised by interviewees were evident. While some interviewees identified openness to new ideas, mindsets and creativity as individual characteristics of "innovation champions", other interviewees described them

as self-confident individuals with high self-esteem. A few interviewees strongly emphasised that they do not distinguish between any characteristics of individuals. The argument was that any definitive characteristics of "innovation champions" can be disputed because they depend on individual subjective perspectives.

Two interviewees expressed their views on types of "innovation champion". The strategic project director from a public construction firm struggled to distinguish between "innovation champion" types in relation to the functional level and context within which they operate:

> "One of our biggest challenges in a project environment we are thinking of doing is to sustain innovation. If you wanted to invest in lots of people and create sort of champions of innovation at project level or site level or functional level... So, we have safety innovation champion, an environmental champion, sustainability and whatever it might be. If we wanted to put these champions in place or give people in existing position the responsibility to promote innovation, clearly if you invest a lot of time, energy and training and sort of cultural alignment to that - we think we could sustain it for a long period of time."

In the above quotation "innovation champions" are loosely distinguished by their area of work (e.g. environmental, safety, sustainability) and business/operational level (e.g. project, site). The role of "champions" is primarily seen to be in promoting and sustaining innovation, achieved by investing time, energy, providing training and "cultural alignment".

In addition, the group innovation knowledge manager from a building contractor firm distinguished between technical and cooperative types of "innovation champions":

> "There are two sorts of innovation champions: you have got technical ones and you have got cooperative ones. So, looking at our business the ones that tend to innovate (whether it is around procurement, process or technology) tend to be proactive; show capability of leadership; good all-round ability; good technically; good communication skills. They understand the context when to apply it and when not to apply it, and actually listen and actually contribute as well. They are learning; they are giving something; they are taking back; they are understanding it; they are developing it, thinking about better ways, applying knowledge. It is about bringing those skills together."

It is noted that the function of "innovation champions" was described by using a particular vocabulary of gerunds (e.g. understanding, learning, giving, taking, developing, thinking and applying), pointing towards a sort of "processual" aspects and actions underpinning identity construction.

Identity construction (and continuous re-construction)

Many interviewees claimed that judgements about sense of self and others are likely to be conditional on who makes the judgements and when they are made. From this perspective, individual perceptions and judgements change over time as circumstances change. The project manager from a consultancy firm explicitly stated that thinking and judgements are ongoing, rather than stable or static:

"Judgements can change, absolutely. It is a case in construction particularly, because a lot of processes take time that actually during the process your requirements and thinking, maturing of knowledge changes. You have different requirements at the end of this process than you had at the beginning. It is quite common."

The above argument was in agreement with the commercial director from a manufacturing firm who emphasised that individuals and organisations need to continuously re-invent themselves over time:

"You have to keep not being myopic. You have to keep re-inventing your products. Tomorrow you re-invent it again, again and again and you need to keep doing it all the time."

In addition and in relation to the above quotation, the manager from a consultancy firm contended that not only ongoing circumstances and judgements shift over time, but the people who make the judgements, their identities and roles change over time:

"You may get to a certain point, but everybody changes, like musical chairs. They all change chairs for the next project. So, the likelihood of capturing an innovation on one project and carrying into the next project is very, very low, unless you have the same client and the same requirements. So, end up with the concept of frameworks and partnering. All of these concepts to sort of capture innovation, but problem of all of those is that there is nothing to control the reconfiguration of teams."

The interviewee strongly emphasised the dynamic nature of changes of individual positions, their perceptions and actions. He also pointed that the project-based nature of the construction sector shapes individual identities: specifically the lack of continuity and lifecycle of projects. These findings reflect the theme of an ongoing process of construction of individual identity in the context of dynamic nature of project and business environments and changes in personal judgements (Figure 1).

Discussion

The empirical findings provide evidence that the social identity themes of analysis derived from the literature (Figure 1) are relevant and applicable for understanding how an "innovation champion" identity is formed. Furthermore, insights into how practitioners construct an "innovation champion" identity can be extended in the following ways.

"Innovation champion" as socially constructed identity

The empirical findings demonstrate that practitioners socially construct their own or others identities as "innovation champions". While some practitioners saw themselves as "innovation champions", many others identified chief executives or people in senior positions as "innovation champions". These findings are consistent with the definition of social identity provided by social theorists such as Alvesson (2010) and Brown *et al.* (2008) who argue that individuals subjectively construct a sense of "self" and others within social groups. Personal identity entwines perceptions and feelings about "self" and others which guide them in particular directions. Alvesson *et al.* (2008) and Ybema *et al.* (2009) provide insights into the ways individual identities are informed by other actors, work settings and

broader social networks. A social identity frame provides a sound theoretical frame for explaining an "innovation champion" as subjectively constructed identity.

"Innovation champions" were commonly described by the interviewees as key individuals who promote innovations across businesses and networks by persuading organisational members. Common views shared by the interviewees are consistent with a definition offered by Zahra *et al.* (2001) who describe the role of "innovation champions" as identifying, refining and supporting innovations introduced by individuals and groups. Similarly, Rogers (2003) define "innovation champions" as key individuals who take an innovation on board, modify and "fit" it into a context. The definition provided by Jenssen and Jörgensen (2004) provide additional insights into the willingness of "innovation champions" to take risks by promoting the development and implementation of an innovation within the context of an organisation and broader networks within which they operate. One of the champions' roles is to convince those who are sceptical or dismissive of an innovation being developed in an organisation. These studies are, however, descriptive in nature, lacking theoretical explanations of the ways practitioners recognise themselves or others as "innovation champions".

Arguments developed by Harty (2008), Nam and Tatum (1997) and Winch (1998) also go some way towards explaining the emphasis placed by the interviewees on "powerful actors" (e.g. CEOs) who "lead the legacy behind innovation". These authors increasingly emphasise the role of a "system integrator" who needs to be convinced of the merits of the new idea and has the skills to incorporate them into the system. Such a perspective is consistent with Garud *et al.* (2013) and Van de Ven *et al.* (2008) who argue that ideas are taken by people who become powerful; the ideas then gain legitimacy and further become

institutionalised. Studies conducted by Bresnen *et al.* (2005) and Green (2011) are of relevance here because they reinforce the role of narratives about practitioners' own or others' identities as important means for promoting innovations across a supply chain and persuading business actors with their narratives. However, these studies do not provide specific insights into self-narratives about "innovation champions" as mobilised by practitioners.

Social construction of several identities

It is evident that practitioners attach different labels to describe "innovation champions". For example, some interviewees used "innovation leaders" and "cultural leaders" labels as synonymous to "innovations champions". Others loosely distinguished types of "innovation champions" by their area of work (e.g. environmental, safety, sustainability), and business/operational level (e.g. project, site; technical and cooperative). Such multiplicities of views contradict assertions mobilised by Howell and Higgins (1990) and Howell *et al.* (2005) that "innovation champions" can be described on the basis of definitive personal characteristics. While Jenssen and Jörgensen (2004) also focus on specific human and social capital characteristics of "innovation champion", they recognise a need for a more comprehensive theoretical framework. The multiplicity of views expressed by the interviewees is in agreement with Green (2011) and Leiringer and Cardellino (2008) who emphasise the complex, dynamic and contested nature of the "innovation champion" identity. However, these studies fall short in providing further explanations into this complexity.

While the labels identified in the literature are different to those mobilised by the interviewees, there is a consistency in recognising that different labels can be attached to "innovation champion" identity. As such, Greenhalgh *et al.* (2004) identify multiple roles of "innovation champions" in service firms and broader social networks (i.e. "mavericks", "transformational leader", "organisational buffer"). With the specific reference to the construction sector, Nam and Tatum (1997) distinguished between different "champion" roles (i.e. "technological", "business", "executive" and "integration"). To some extent, these different roles are more closely aligned with the types of "innovation champions" recognised by the interviewees. This suggests that the role of context is important in understanding of an "innovation champion" identity.

To some extent, the interviewees demonstrated social construction processes of several identities, rather than one single identity. Alvesson (2010) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) provide theoretical explanations of the ways individuals socially construct several identities. They position identity as multiple in nature, where people may construct several identities that can change across contexts and over time. Their work acknowledges that people may attach several labels to their own or others' identities, especially in the context of rapidly changing work environment. The meaning of these labels may be complementary, but may also be contradictory. The empirical findings demonstrate that interviewees used "innovation leaders" and "cultural leaders" labels interchangeably. However, struggles and tensions were evident in the narratives about "innovation champion" identities.

Continuous re-construction of identities over time

The narratives mobilised by interviewees are reflective of ongoing struggles and ambiguities, as they acknowledge the possibility of changes in people's positions, leadership styles and business environments. Of particular note is that the narratives mobilised by the interviewees are suggestive of the ways in which they continuously re-construct identities over time. Interviewees increasingly emphasised that perceptions and judgements about sense of "self" and others depend on who makes the judgements and when they are made. From this perspective, individuals may re-construct or re-label their identities, as their thinking changes and contextual circumstances change. Such a view is consistent with Alvesson (2010) and Cunliffe and Coupland (2011) who describes identity in "processual terms". These authors argue that social actors may re-construct their identities, with the reference to dynamic and uncertain social contexts. It is observed that much of the organisational literature is silent in acknowledging "processual" aspects of an "innovation champion" label. It is a social identity theory that explicitly recognises that individuals may re-think and re-label their or others' identities during organisational journeys.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the ways an "innovation champion" identity is formulated in the context of UK construction sector. A model of "innovation champion" themes derived from the literature on social identity was presented and then validated through empirical research findings. It has been demonstrated that a social identity frame provides fruitful insights in understanding "innovation champion" as a socially constructed identity. To date, research into understanding of an "innovation champion" from a social identity perspective

has been somewhat limited. The present paper has extended upon prior research and theory by exploring the ways practitioners see themselves or others as "innovation champions". The concept of social identity presents opportunities to enrich our understanding of the "innovation champion" label that can stimulate people's reflections on who they are and what they do. Practitioners socially construct "innovation champion" identities through narratives about selves or others. "Innovation champions" are often recognised as people in senior positions who promote innovations across businesses and convince organisational actors with their narratives. Social context is seen to be important in the process of social construction of an "innovation champion" identity.

In times of constantly changing technologies and business environments, the role of "champions" who promote innovations and improve organisations is crucial. The paper has clarified the extent to which subjectively constructed identities of who people were, are and desire to become are seen important to strategic decisions and future actions. The potential contribution to practice is to help current and new generations of practitioners to learn about how to be or become an "innovation champion". While this research has focused on the UK construction sector, the findings are potentially useful for other sectors where "innovation champion" labels are commonly used. The findings of the paper point towards a need to examine further the underlying intentions by which practitioners construct multiple identities. Future research may deepen our understanding of the way practitioners re-construct their identities over time, depending on changes in their views and contextual circumstances. Such research may include day-to-day ethnography, where researchers become attuned to a variety of complex social situations and carefully observing the way practitioners self-project their identities for themselves and others. This may deepen our

understanding of "organisational becoming" in terms of the ways practitioners see themselves at present and constructing images for the future.

References

Alvesson, M. (2010). "Self-doubters, strugglers, storytellers, suffers and others: Images of self-identities in organization studies". *Human Relations,* Vol. 63 No. 2, pp. 193-217.

Alvesson, M., Ashcraft, K. L. and Thomas, R. (2008). "Identity matters: Reflection on the construction of identity scholarship in organization studies". *Organization*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 5-28.

Alvesson, M. and Thompson, P. (2005). "Post-bureaucracy?", In Ackroyds, S. et al. (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Work and Organization Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, USA, pp. 485-507.

Bessant, J. and Tidd, J. (2011). *Innovation and entrepreneurship*. John Wiley & Sons, West Sussex, UK.

Blayse, A. and Manley, K. (2004). "Key influences on construction innovation". *Construction Innovation,* Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 143-154.

Bresnen, M., Goussevskaia, A. and Swan, J. (2005). "Implementing change in construction project organizations: Exploring the interplay between structure and agency". *Building Research & Information,* Vol. 33 No. 6, pp. 547-560.

Brown, A. D. and Phua, F. T. T. (2011). "Subjectively constructed identities and discourse: Towards a research agenda for construction management". *Construction Management and Economics,* Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 83-95.

Brown, A. D., Stacey, P. and Nandhakumar, J. (2008). "Making sense of sensemaking narratives". *Human Relations,* Vol. 61 No. 8, pp. 1035–1062.

Büchel, B., Nieminen, L., Armbruster-Domeyer, H. and Denison, D. (2013). "Managing stakeholders in team-based innovation: The dynamics of knowledge and trust networks". *European Journal of Innovation Management*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 22-49.

Chesbrough, H. and Crowther, A. K. (2006). "Beyond high tech: Early adopters of open innovation in other sector". *R&D Management,* Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 229-236.

Constructing Excellence (2013). "Constructing Excellence in 2012-13". (http://www.constructingexcellence.org.uk/). London, UK.

Cottam, A., Ensor, J. and Band, C. (2001). "A benchmark study of strategic commitment to innovation". *European Journal of Innovation Management*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 88-94.

Cunliffe, A. and Coupland, C. (2011). "From hero to villain to hero: Making experience sensible through embodies narrative sensemaking". *Human Relations,* Vol. 65 No. 1, pp. 63-88.

Currie, G. and Brown, A. D. (2003). "A narratological approach to understanding processes of organizing in a UK hospital". *Human Relations,* Vol. 56 No. 5, pp. 563-586.

Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (2013). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials.* Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.

Gann, D. M. (2001). "Putting academic ideas into practice: Technological progress and the absorptive capacity of construction organisations". *Construction Management and Economics,* Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 321-330.

Garud, R., Tuertscher, P. and Van de Ven, A. H. (2013). "Perspectives on innovation processes". *The Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 773-817.

Gioia, D., Schulz, M. and Corley, K. (2000). "Organizational identity, image, and adaptive instability". *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 63-81.

Gluch, P. (2009). "Unfolding roles and identities of professionals in construction projects: Exploring the informality of practices". *Construction Management and Economics,* Vol. 27 No. 10, pp. 959-968.

Green, S. D. (2011). *Making sense of construction improvement.* Wiley & Sons, Sessex, UK.

Greenhalgh, T., Robert, G., MacFarlane, F., Bate, P. and Kyriakidou, O. (2004). "Diffusion of innovations in service organizations: Systematic review and recommendations". *Milbank Quarterly,* Vol. 82 No. 4, pp. 581-629.

Häggman, S. K. (2009). "Functional actors and perceptions of innovation attributes: Influence on innovation adoption". *European Journal of Innovation Management*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 386-407.

Harty, C. (2008). "Implementing innovation in construction: Contexts, relative boundedness and actor-network theory". *Construction Management and Economics,* Vol. 26 No. 10, pp. 1029-1041.

Howell, J. A. and Higgins, C. A. (1990). "Champions of technological innovation". *Administrative Science Quarterly,* Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 317-341.

Howell, J. A., Shea, C. M. and Higgins, C. A. (2005). "Champions of product innovations: Defining, developing, and validating a measure of champion behaviour". *Journal of Business Venturing,* Vol. 20 No. 5, pp. 641-661.

Ivory, C. (2005). "The cult of customer responsiveness: Is design innovation the price of a client-focused construction industry?" *Construction Management and Economics*, Vol. 23 No. 8, pp. 861-870.

Jenssen, J. I. and Jörgensen, G. (2004). "How do corporate champions promote innovations?". *International Journal of Innovation Management*, Vo. 8 No. 1, pp. 63-86.

Kärreman, D. and Alvesson, M. (2004). "Cages in tandem: Management control, social identity, and identification in knowledge-intense firm". *Organization*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 149-175.

Kelley, D. and Lee, H. (2010). "Managing innovation champions: The impact of project characteristics on the direct manager role". *Journal of Product Innovation Management,* Vol. 27 No. 7, pp. 1007-1019.

Langley, A., Smallman, C., Tsoukas, H. and Van de Ven, A. H. (2013). "Process studies of change in organization and management: Unveiling temporality, activity, and flow". *Academy of Management Journal,* Vol. 56 No. 1, pp. 1-13.

Leiringer, R. and Cardellino, P. (2008). "Tales of the expected: Investigating the rhetorical strategies of innovation champions". *Construction Management and Economics,* Vol. 26 No. 10, pp. 1043-1054.

Lu, S.-L. and Sexton, M. (2006). "Innovation in small construction knowledge-intense professional service firms: A case study of an architectural practice". *Construction Management and Economics*, Vol. 24 No. 12, pp. 1269-1282.

Maclean, M., Harvey, C. and Chia, R. (2011). "Sensemaking, storytelling and the legitimization of elite business careers". *Human Relations*, Vol. 65 No. 1, pp. 17-40.

Nam, C. H. and Tatum, C. B. (1997). "Leaders and champions for construction innovation". *Construction Management and Economics*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 259-270.

Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovation.* Free Press, NY, USA.

Somers, M. R. and Gibson, G. D. (1992). "Reclaiming the epistemological "other": Narrative and the social constitution of identity", In Calhoun C., *Social theory and the politics of identity*, Blackwell, Oxford, USA, pp. 37-99.

Sveningsson, S. and Alvesson, M. (2003). "Managing managerial identities". *Human Relations*, Vol. 56 No. 10, pp. 1163-1193.

Swan, J. and Scarbrough, H. (2005). "The politics of networked innovation". *Human Relations,* Vol. 58 No. 7, pp. 913-943.

Thomas, R. and Davies, A. (2005). "Theorising the micro-politics of resistance: Discourses of change and professional identities in the UK public services". *Organization Studies*, Vol. 26 No. 5, pp. 683-706.

Tomkins, L. and Eatough, V. (2012). "Stop 'helping' me! Identity, recognition and agency in the nexus of work and care". *Organization,* Vol. 0 No. 0, pp. 1-19.

Ybema, A., Keenoy, T., Oswick, C., Beverungen, A.. Ellis, N. and Sabelis, I. (2009). "Articulating identities". *Human Relations*, Vol. 62 No. 3, pp. 299-322.

Van de Ven, A., Polley, D., Garud, R. and Venkataraman, S. (2008). *The innovation journey*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, USA.

Winch, G. M. (1998). "Zephyrs of creative destruction: Understanding the management of innovation in construction". *Building Research & Information,* Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 268-279.

Zahra, S., Hayton, J., Marcel, J. and O'Neill, H. (2001). "Fostering entrepreneurship during international expansion: Managing key challenges". *European Management Journal*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 359-369.