Projectyness: A spectrum of greater or lesser capability

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Abstract

Grounding in continental philosophical perspectives, and in alignment with the calls to *rethink project management*, this article reconceptualises what *is* a project. This conceptual paper uses the theoretical concepts of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Dawkins as an interpretative lens to consider project work. The findings are that no activity is innately a project. A project is an experience that arises when there is a lack of inherent capability to undertake the activity. It is associated with a projecty experience: spikiness, roughness, and emotional ups and downs. Furthermore, it is found that there is no point of clear distinction between operational and project work: there is a projectyness spectrum. Based on these findings, we identify that project managing is about managing a lack of inherent capability and managing multiple people's experience (not a single detached activity). Furthermore, the point at which to adopt project management techniques is not definitive.
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1. Introduction

In this conceptual paper, we propose that projects are an experience, rather than a thing. Furthermore, this experience is grounded in the inherent capability of the person/s undertaking the activity. We also propose that project experiences are on a spectrum of greater or lesser projectyness. One end of the spectrum is 'very projecty' and the other end is 'not at all projecty' (or operational) (refer below for further information regarding these new terms).

This paper is grounded in the calls for new perspectives on project management that focus on the practice of project management and that challenge the previously dominant foundational paradigms (for example Winter et al. (2006); Blomquist et al. (2010) and the edited monograph *Novel approaches to organisational project management research* (Drouin et al., 2013)). Specifically, this paper provides a new conceptualisation of 'what is project work' which is more closely reflective of the practice experience.

We introduce this conceptual proposition with the analogy of the varying experience of scariness in riding a rollercoaster.

What is a scary rollercoaster is dependent on an individual; their preferences, their biology, and past experiences. As such, rollercoasters are on a spectrum of scariness according to a particular individual. What is scary for one person may not be particularly scary for another. What is interesting is that the degree of scariness is not in the rollercoaster itself, it is in the relationship between the ride and the person riding it. A rollercoaster is not scary without people who find it so.

Our discussion stems from a continental perspective of project work and takes key concepts from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Dawkins to consider an alternative perspective of what a project *is* within our broader experience of work. Traditional conceptions of projects, we would argue, are based in a positivist ontology (also refer Bredillet (2004)) and analytical philosophy, and draw an absolute distinction between operational and project work. For example, we may distinguish project work from operational work in terms such as uncertainty, unique, cross-functional, temporary, and change (Office of Government Commerce, 2009). Operational work being ongoing work that has stability and is routine, and project work having a defined start and finish, and delivering a new product or service. Furthermore, traditionally, it is implied

that it is possible to clearly distinguish between these two types of work. Our reconceptualisation is in contrast to both these traditional definitions and distinctions.

Using continental philosophy thinking tools, we propose that there is not a clear distinction between operational and project work. Furthermore, we propose that varying levels of capability is the source of more or less projectyness.

The terms projecty and projectyness are new terms to the project management discourse. We consider the introduction of these new terms to be justified as they highlight to the reader the significant shift in our conceptualisation of work. Projecty is a particular perception or experience of work. This perception is not just cognitive but also emotional. More projecty is an experience of greater spikiness, roughness, or emotional ups and downs (refer van der Hoorn (2015) for this experience of project work). Less projecty is an experience of greater smoothness or stability. When we refer to the terms spikiness, roughness, and ups and downs, we are referring to a dynamic experience in work. For example, moving between an experience of happiness, thrill, and excitement to an experience of stress, anxiety, and frustration. The focus is not on the ups (e.g. thrill) or the downs (stress), but on the moving between the experiences. We could visualise these as shown in Fig. 1. A more projecty experience is the result of one's lesser capability or greater hindrances to undertake that work. A less projecty experience is a result of one's greater capability or lack of hindrances to undertaking the activity. We call this spectrum of greater or lesser capability to undertake an activity: projectyness (refer Fig. 2).

We begin by introducing the drivers for our research inquiry in terms of a research problem and introduce relevant literature. Based on this literature review, we define a focused area for our inquiry, outline our research methodology, and then key theoretical concepts are introduced. These theoretical concepts are then applied to the project context and we discuss the implications of the findings. Our conclusion summarises the implications of our findings, highlights the limitations of the study, and identifies related areas for future research.

2. Research problem

The Rethinking Project Management network in 2006 (Winter and Smith, 2006) was a key catalyst for a new research agenda in project management. This research agenda focused on research about practice and the 'lived experience' (or the actuality of what occurs in projects) (Cicmil et al., 2006). It is commonly recognised as a shift from the positivist, functional, and analytical underpinnings of the discipline (Bredillet, 2004; Bredillet, 2013; Bredillet, 2010; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Rolfe, 2011; Thomas and Mengel, 2008). This agenda was driven by the ongoing dissatisfaction with how despite a developing research discipline there was not significant improvement in project delivery—this continues today (Alenezi et al., 2015; Bloch et al., 2012; Chanda and Ray, 2015; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; KPMG, 2013; PM Solutions Research, 2011; Thomas, 2006; Winter et al., 2006).

Since the Rethinking Project Management network, there has been a growing discourse on alternative philosophical perspectives and research methodologies for the discipline. For example, Cicmil (2006) proposes the use of interpretative and critical perspectives for researching projects and their management. Rolfe (2011, p. 59) challenges the dominant conceptions of project management by arguing that projects are better considered as 'an existential response to a crisis' than application of 'best practice' tools and methodologies. Jacobsson et al. (2015) argue for the necessity of a plurality in our understanding of projects and draw on the concept of family resemblance to understand 'what is a project.' And in a final example, Young (2015) highlights the need for exploring new epistemological and ontological perspectives in our project management inquiry. He highlights the need for a practice focus rather than the traditional research with their prescriptive bodies of knowledge and best practice guidelines. While such new propositions are important in providing new paradigms and perspectives, they generally continue to have an 'object' focus. By an 'object' focus, we are referring to the designation of projects as being something 'out there,' a thing—which is separate to the 'subject' which can witness the 'object'. (The philosophical grounding of this concept is further discussed in Section 6.2.) Similarly, there remains an overall sentiment in the literature that project work can be distinguished from operational work in a discontinuous fashion. We propose that it is necessary to consider an alternative 'lived experience' approach to these assumptions of objectivity and discontinuity in work. And through this, we can newly understand what a project is from a practice perspective, and further open the way to develop tools and techniques that will improve their delivery.

3. Literature review

Our objective is to consider an alternative 'subject' perspective of project work, and also a classification of project work in terms of a continuum of experience of work. As such, we will begin by
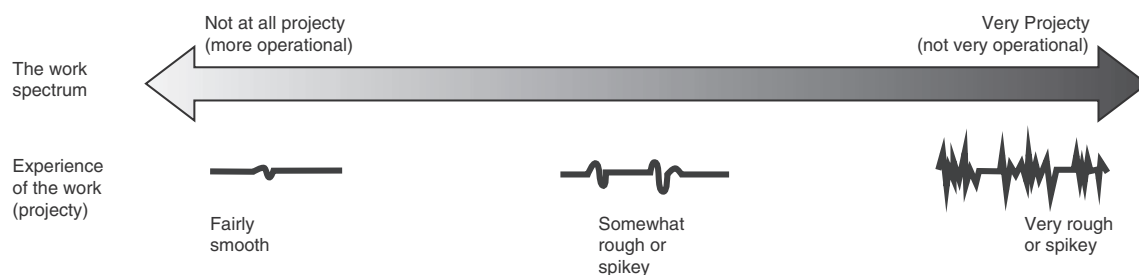

Fig. 1. The projecty spectrum. *Figure developed based on concepts from* Dawkins (2004, 2011), Merleau-Ponty (2004), *and* van der Hoorn and Whitty (2015a).