

Playing projects: Identifying flow in the ‘lived experience’



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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the ‘lived experience’ of projects discourse. The research study uses an arts-based research method (musical improvisation on a xylophone and/or glockenspiel) to access the participant’s perception of their experience of managing a project. Participants are then asked to explain their improvisation and therefore their experience. Key findings were that participants described their ‘lived experience’ of project managing as having ‘ups and downs’, including challenges and issues, and as experiencing variations in emotions over the project lifecycle. Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory is used to show that these ‘lived experience’ findings support a Heideggerian paradigm and personal perspective of what a project is. Projectness is not a characteristic of the activity itself. A project is a personal phenomenon defined in terms of the relationship between the individual or organisation and activity. It is dependent on capability versus the challenge presented by the activity.

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1. Introduction

This research study aims to contribute to the ‘lived experience’ of projects literature, highlighting how this perspective can bring new insights to fundamental project concepts. The motivation for the research is to contribute to the diversification of our understanding of projects beyond the knowledge captured by positivist scientific research. This impetus is driven by the suggestion that the often positivist and Cartesian foundations that underpin much existing traditional project management research and practice are not sufficient to improve project outcomes. It is posited that through enriching our understanding of the phenomena of projects, which includes an understanding of the personal ‘lived experience’, we will further our knowledge of projects-in-practice. It is from this understanding of the ‘lived experience’ that we may derive new insights that improve project outcomes.

The ‘lived experience’ approach to project research is focused on capturing what actually happens in projects (Cicmil et al., 2006). This ‘lived experience’ stream of inquiry sees project management as social conduct, and that there is a need to understand what project managers actually do in concrete

situations, the social processes, thinking in action and the actual experience of practitioners in situ (Cicmil et al., 2006).

In order to capture a ‘lived experience’ perspective, this study leverages an arts-based inquiry research method. The selected method echoes Whitty’s (2010) artefacts and emotions study that required project managers to characterise the concept of a project in the form of a line drawing and provide a subsequent explanation of their representation. This study draws on musical improvisation as a device to access the ‘lived experience’ rather than drawing. The improvisation is followed by a semi-structured discussion between researcher and participant regarding the meaning behind the improvised sounds played. In the analysis priority and weight are given to the discussion rather than the actual improvisation. The musical instrument is simply a methodological device for creating a musical improvisation that enables a discourse to take place that discloses a personal perspective of managing a project. It facilitates an exploration of the perceived ‘lived experience’ of managing a project.

The paper firstly provides an outline of the research problem. An overview of the literature is then provided from which the research question is derived and into which a contribution is made. A description and justification of the selected research approach

and the findings of the study follow this. The discussion considers the implications for the findings, and particularly draws on the concept of flow theory to highlight how the personal ‘lived experience’ (such as that described by the participants in this study) can challenge fundamental discipline concepts such as ‘what is a project?’. Limitations and constraints of the research are provided, and recommendations for further research are noted.

2. Research problem

There is ongoing discourse in the project management literature regarding the challenges of project delivery and the prevalence of project failure (Gerald et al., 2011; McHugh and Hogan, 2011; Thomas, 2006; Winter et al., 2006; Zwikaël and Bar-Yoseph, 2004). Project management has evolved from a positivist foundation and this foundation continues to underpin the project management tools and techniques that are in prevalent use today (Bredillet, 2004). Bredillet (2004) argues that these positivist underpinnings may be contributing to the challenges experienced in project delivery.

As such, there have been calls to adopt alternative perspectives when researching and conceptualising the phenomena of projects. This includes the call for a ‘lived experience’ perspective of projects (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil et al., 2006; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Lineham and Kavanagh, 2006; Smyth and Morris, 2007). A similar, more recent call is to utilise a Heideggerian paradigm (which has a focus of ‘being-in’, a contextualised, personal experience) to provide the ontological underpinning for project research and practice (van der Hoorn and Whitty, 2015). Literature capturing the ‘lived experience’ of projects is increasing, however there is still relatively little literature that takes a particularly personal, contextualised view of project work. This research study will contribute to this area of the ‘lived experience’ literature.

3. Literature review

The following literature review is divided into three sections. Firstly, the extant discourse on project management delivery failure and disappointment is provided. This includes the proposition that the current dominant paradigm underpinning much project research and practice is problematic. The call to consider alternative paradigms to underpin the discipline and lenses through which to explore projects are then discussed. Finally, previous studies that have explored the particularly personal aspects of the ‘lived experience’ of managing a project are reviewed.

3.1. Dissatisfaction with project management

There has been significant discourse in the project literature, that despite the growth of formalised project management methodologies, projects continue to fail to meet expectations (Gerald et al., 2011; McHugh and Hogan, 2011; Thomas, 2006; Winter et al., 2006; Zwikaël and Bar-Yoseph, 2004). For example, Gerald et al. (2011) highlight that whilst organisations and individuals are seeking to improve project performance, such

improvements are not being realised; and this is despite many organisations adopting ‘best practice’ project management methods. Zwikaël and Bar-Yoseph (2004) posit that there is still significant disappointment regarding the realities of project delivery, suggesting this is possibly due to a strong focus on technical management components. We would suggest that this highlights the positivist foundations of much practice.

There is also a plethora of reports on projects continuing to fail to meet management expectation and/or to deliver within time and on budget. Quantitatively, it is widely accepted that 80–90% of ICT investments fail to meet their objectives (Standards Australia, 2006). PM Solutions Research (2011) found that of the 163 organisations in their sample, 37% of their projects were ‘at risk’ or had already failed. A McKinsey & Company Report (Bloch et al., 2012) suggests that in the current climate, for projects to deliver \$15 million in benefits, you would need to spend \$59 million. A 2013 report by KPMG (focused on New Zealand), found that failure rates of projects actually increased since their 2010 survey. Another IT-focused survey reported that only 37% of projects were completed on time, budget and scope (PlanIT, 2013).

Extant commentary suggests that much of the prevalent project research and ‘best practice’ methods are underpinned by positivism (Bredillet, 2004; Pollack, 2007; Smyth and Morris, 2007). Positivism is of the natural sciences tradition. It is an ontological approach that positions the researcher external to the phenomena being researched; objectivity and detachment are valued; universals are sought; and often the phenomena being observed are divided into discrete components for examination (Saunders et al., 2009). Bredillet (2004, pp. 1–2) argues that it may be this positivist (or hard paradigm) grounding that may be leading to the problems experienced in project delivery and is a “barrier to effective understanding and communication of the true nature of project management”. Cicmil and Hodgson (2006) also recognise that there may be problems with the positivist foundations of much project research.

3.2. Calls to consider projects from new perspectives

Having discussed the ‘under delivery’ of project management and the likelihood that this is contributed to by the positivist ontology underpinning much existing research and project management tools, it is pertinent to consider the calls to revise the lenses through which the discipline is examined.

For example, Cicmil et al. (2006) propose the need for research of the ‘lived experience’ of projects (as introduced in Section 1). Their proposition is based on the outcomes of the Rethinking Project Management Network which called for a stronger focus on project management practice in research. Cicmil et al. (2006) provide a discussion of the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that would underpin such a perspective. Hodgson and Cicmil (2006) propose a danger in establishing a blind acceptance of universal techniques and therefore published a book on considering project managing through alternative perspectives, including

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