Institutional development, divergence and change in the discipline of project management

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Abstract

Inspired by Peter Morris's major contribution to the field of project management, this paper takes up some of the challenges facing the development of the discipline of project management which are so eloquently articulated in Reconstructing Project Management (2013). Drawing upon insights from theory and research on communities of practice, forms of knowledge production, processes of structuration and institutionalisation, it highlights the diversity and complexity in the field of project management practice, theory and research and harnesses these ideas to highlight the opportunities and tensions this diversity creates. In considering the implications for the institutionalisation of project management as a professional body of knowledge and academic discipline, the argument is developed that there is not only great value to be gained by pursuing these lines of enquiry further, but also that there it is important to acknowledge diversity within the field and encourage criticality in perspective.

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1. Introduction

Through his seminal contributions to the field of project management theory and practice, Peter Morris has had a profound effect not only upon the generation of knowledge of importance to the development of the discipline, but also upon its continuing institutionalisation in a professional body of knowledge and infrastructure of supporting practices and organisational arrangements. Not least of these are his many contributions to the work of the Association for Project Management (APM) and to this journal in which this Festschrift appears.

Peter's very early and systematic approach to unravelling the complex relationship between the unfolding logic of project tasks and the extant institutional arrangements established for the governance of construction projects (Morris, 1973) was a significant influence on this author's own early work. More than that, however, it still resonates with contemporary challenges faced in furthering the institutionalisation of project management as a professional body of knowledge and academic discipline. Indeed, juxtaposing how logics of action relate to their institutional context — in the case, with regard to the discipline of project management itself — continues to be a fundamental issue (Morris, 2013). What we know about project management and organisation is shaped by a huge variety of actors and institutions and informed by the diverse orientations and interests that they represent. Not only does this diversity exist across the many disciplines and domains of practice that are interested in, and contribute towards, project management; it is also found in the many different 'recipes' for research and practice associated with different schools of thought within project management itself (Morris, 2013: 110–111). Examining these differences and understanding their effects on the development of the practice and discipline of project management is therefore both

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timely and important. This is even more so perhaps given the recognition through Peter's work of the breadth of application and relevance of project thinking (Morris, 1994) as well as the specificity of knowledge and depth of analysis required in furtherance of project performance (Morris and Hough, 1987).

Elsewhere, it has been argued that there are important epistemic differences between the ways in which we develop our understandings of, on the one hand, project management and organisation and, on the other, organisational processes of knowledge management, learning and change (Bresnen, 2006). Together these differences are reflected in the challenge of reconciling the project and the organisation as competing units of analysis in the pursuit of knowledge about project management and organisation. Symptomatic of these differences too perhaps are the challenges in situating project management as a self-contained discipline within mainstream business and engineering schools or in the many related disciplines (ranging from computer science to biotechnology to arts and the media) in which project management plays an inevitable and vitally important part. As someone who also occasionally straddles the communities of scholars engaged in project based research in business and construction or engineering schools, this author has a particular personal interest in what this all means for the sense of (professional) identity associated with being a project management researcher (cf Muzio et al, 2013).

At one level, it could be presumed that such diversity means that the development of a project management body of knowledge — in attempting to blend the domains of theory and practice, in particular — is characteristic of a more problem-focused and heterogeneously organised form of knowledge production. At the same time, however, it is clear that the continuing search for a coherent body of knowledge that codifies what we know about (and what we should know about) project organisation and management — reflected, for example, in debates about PMBOK (e.g. Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007) — represents a search for a set of professional codes and practices that is more redolent of a more disciplinary-based and homogenously organised form of knowledge production.

The tensions implied in this dual orientation echo those surfaced in a long-standing distinction in science and policy studies between what are referred to as distinct 'modes' of knowledge production (Gibbons et al, 1994; Nowotny et al, 2001). According to proponents of this view, scientific research has generally shifted over time towards a more practically driven and diversely organised system of knowledge production (they label this 'Mode 2') and away from one that was traditionally more academically oriented and organised (they label this 'Mode 1'). The distinction is explored further later and, while these categorizations are of course very broad and, as will be seen, also highly contentious (Bresnen and Burrell, 2013), it is argued in this paper that they nevertheless provide a useful heuristic for understanding and exploring the many tensions and contradictions that still make the search for the institutionalisation of project management knowledge a continuing challenge and project in its own right. In particular, that they can be used to help highlight and explore the tensions and paradoxes of institutional development and change (cf Seo and Creed, 2002) that have been connected with the emergence of the discipline and which are associated with the interplay of diverse logics of action (PMBOK v MOP, theory v practice, mainstream v critical, etc).

Without the substantial platform represented by Peter's enormous contribution to the development of the discipline and the 'institutional entrepreneurship' (Maguire et al, 2004) and 'institutional work' that it represents (cf. Suddaby and Viale, 2011), such an exercise would be inconceivable. However, this paper argues that there is still plenty of space left for researchers to rise to the many challenges recently flagged up by Peter (and by others) in understanding the obstacles that still remain to the further development and institutionalisation of the discipline.

2. Effacing or embracing diversity in practice and perspective?

In his recently published book, Reconstructing project management (2013), Peter Morris charts how project management as a practice and as a discipline has developed enormously in the last several decades, from a largely intuitive set of skills to a highly popular management discipline. As such, it is now associated with a reasonably well established and institutionalised body of knowledge (associated with the PMI's project management book of knowledge (PMBOK) and alternatives, such as the APM book of knowledge). However, he argues that there remain many challenges ahead in forging a common and workable collective understanding about the nature of project management, its techniques and skills that not only combines the rigour associated with being built upon a solid corpus of academic thinking and research, but also the relevance that comes from being directly driven by practitioner needs and concerns (cf. Pettigrew, 2001). As he neatly puts it:

> "...project management as a discipline is neither yet reliable enough nor engaged enough in improving its clients' performance." (Morris, 2013: 270)

Principal amongst these challenges and the central theme of Peter Morris's work is getting across the core idea that it is vital to take a Management of Projects (MOP) approach that emphasises the importance of taking the project as the focus and unit of analysis and which places emphasis on front-end project definition, the importance of the sponsor and project leadership and a more strategic approach to the management of stakeholders and externalities. Learning the techniques and procedures of project management are important, of course. But they represent a level of tactical and operational detail that is below that of the more strategic orientation which, according to Morris, is needed for the effective management of projects.

In many ways, the debate generated by this difference in orientation between MOP and PMBOK approaches represents a continuing 'hearts and minds' battle for a shared collective understanding of the nature and purpose of project management which can be distilled in the skills required of, and practised by,