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The Introspective Project Manager

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Summary: The project manager must navigate a myriad of social processes and contexts concurrently with the application of technical skills. The experience of making context appropriate judgements is internal to the project manager, albeit involving essential interactions with others. We seek to make that lived experience of the project manager directly accessible. Access is often limited because of a lack of an appropriate vocabulary to articulate the missing sociological dimension.. We help project managers find their voice through autoethnography and draw attention to seven key concepts articulated through the Chicago School of Sociology and the phenomenology of the Continental Philosophers.

The Introspective Project Manager

This paper supports the call from the UK government's EPSRC funded *Rethinking Project Management* research network for a new perspective in Project Management (PM) that can explore and illuminate the social processes taking place in the PM practice, specifically the lived experience of the project manager (Winter, Smith, Cooke-Davies et al. 2006; Winter, Smith, Morris et al. 2006); Cicmil et al. (2006). The internal processes form part of the lived experience and are part of the context of making appropriate judgements, albeit involving essential interactions with others. Understanding how we form judgements, and learning from these insights, requires access to the internal process.

By way of example we present a vignette from the lived experience of a project manager engaged in the Alpine Way Reconstruction in Thredbo NSW, following the 1997 landslide. Our PM practitioner was located onsite in Thredbo between February 1998 and April 1999. The role offered direct and daily access to the client, the specialist design team, the construction contractor, the local community and various stakeholder groups. The vignette below is the project manager's account of an event that took place about two months into the project. At that stage, in the eyes of the PM practitioner, the project was progressing well and there was reasonable confidence of timely completion.

<p>The following 'event' comprises a briefing to the Thredbo local community by Kosciusko Thredbo Ltd after the landslide at the commencement of the reconstruction works (Kosciusko Thredbo Ltd - KT – is the syndicate who was granted a 99 year lease in 1957 from the NSW State Government to</p>

develop the Thredbo Resort).

KT as the operator, held community briefings from time to time. This briefing was organised at very short notice.

There was a reasonable turnout at the meeting. By now I could recognise all the faces and I knew most of them by their first name or their nick name. I did not recognise anyone from the media. But it was made known that KT's managing director was also briefing the media in Sydney.

To the surprise of all the attendees, KT's spokesperson commenced by stating how seriously concerned they were over the National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS) delay in commencing the reconstruction project and, secondly, the speed at which the work was progressing (Clennell 1998). He referred to "too little too late" being done by NPWS (Staff Reporters SMH 1998, p1). Their main concern was that a large part of the Alpine Way would remain incomplete at end of stage 1, understandably, as these works were scheduled as part of stage 2. Under these circumstances, KT said they saw little option left but to recommend 19 of the 33 classified as "high" to "very high" risk in the Engineer's Report remain closed over the winter season of 1998.

Whilst the briefing was in progress, I could feel everybody's eyes were in my direction. I felt red with embarrassment and perhaps, shocked. I did not feel like looking around. I can clearly remember leaning forward, resting both my hands on the balustrade in front of me and looking down on it. The statement was also a surprise, as none of these concerns had been previously raised with the PM team in meetings.

At the end of the meeting, KT's spokesperson came up to me and apologised for any embarrassment caused personally to me or the team but advised that their engineers were very concerned. With difficulty I tried to look unconcerned. Some members of the local community, as we all filed out of the room, gave me a tap on the shoulder or arm, as if to say, "Don't take it personally".

Whilst walking back to the office I called my Client to brief him on KT's community briefing just concluded. He, too, had been left unaware of this media release. On returning to the site office, attaching a copy of the media release, I faxed him a note recording my interpretation of KT's presentation. An hour later, my client called me to advise that KT's media release was likely to be aired over the 6 pm news that evening. I then briefed the project team of the incident, and the possibility of this being on the evening's news coverage, giving them advice that we should not be distracted by these media releases and to maintain focus on the task at hand.

It was business as usual for the rest of the day. However, I felt extremely uneasy all day, thinking about the incident and fearing what might be the consequences. I also had concerns for how this could affect the morale of the workmen, already struggling from the long working days and extended time away from their families. I also thought of the effect on the lodges and the already struggling Thredbo economy.

Whilst aspects of this event are specific to the Thredbo Project, we can interpret all projects as a sequence of events. Awareness of events and what they do to the project manager's confidence, motivation, their feelings, thoughts, and perhaps their behaviour is important. We believe that direct access to this level of information is important to understanding the lived experience and the subsequent behaviour of project managers. In this paper we are concerned with how we can gain access to this lived experience.

As the above vignette highlights, the full nature of the pressures on a project manager and how a project manager might deal with them are beyond the project management Bodies of Knowledge (BOKs). We believe that to understand the complexity of human interaction and the full pressures on a project manager, that is the 'lived experience' of the project manager, requires a far deeper, and very personal, level of introspection. This paper introduces autoethnography to project management as an analytical tool that can significantly enhance the insights drawn from research into the lived experience.

To explore the lived experience of the project manager, we identify the need to move beyond the positivist and scientific tradition, engaging instead with the interpretive paradigm. We move beyond the limiting rhetoric of the quantitative / qualitative debate and accept Silverman's (2005, p.112) contention that there are 'no right or wrong methods' in approaching research, merely some tools that are more appropriate to a particular inquiry. What is important is that the particular approach and methodology has to evolve from the researcher's philosophical and theoretical stance (Creswell 2007). Drawing on Creswell (2007, p.16), a central feature of this involves: how reality is viewed (ontology); how the researcher comes to know what he or she knows (epistemology); the role of values influencing the research (axiology); methods used in the process (methodology); and, the vocabulary of the research (rhetoric).

We find that the orthodoxy and competencies of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBok) lack the vocabulary to articulate the social processes of PM practice that is reliant on people's views, interpretation, and feelings. Instead, we find our lexicon in the concepts arising from the Chicago School of Sociology and the Continental Philosophers (such as phenomenology). There is growing support towards a shift in focus (from the traditional functionalist / positivist approach) by engaging in qualitative research methods that can better recognise interpretive accounts. Such approaches better reflect the experiences of project managers and generate 'understandings of what goes on in project practice and how practitioners participate in and manage projects' (Cicmil 2006, p.36).

In the Thredbo example, we wanted to explore why the PM practitioner acted, thought, and engaged in the way that they did. To achieve this, the exploration has been undertaken retrospectively, drawing on a range of artefacts including comprehensive journal entries, memory, reflective practice, case files, project documentation, and media records. It is not an exploration that could have been actively pursued concurrently with the project, as it would have potentially caused an inappropriate

level of distraction from the execution of professional judgement within the PM practitioner's day job at the time.

A challenge that such a research approach confronts, in being objective, is that there is no place in traditional research methodology for the 'I' (i.e. the researcher) other than in the role of observer. This led us to search for an appropriate methodology to legitimise the exploration of the researcher's own lived experience, their thoughts, feelings, and memory as a key participant in a major PM reconstruction scheme. We wanted to be able to illuminate subtle aspects, such as meanings, that went on in the PM practitioner's mind, through such reflective questions as: What are my lived experiences? Did I have a generalised other? What is my self-concept? How did my lived experiences change through the project timescale? How did I feel?

Realising that such insights are deeper than most reported project management experiences care to venture, we looked at the suitability of the traditional approaches of grounded theory, action research, narrative research, and ethnography to ascertain their appropriateness to the task. However, none of these approaches could provide this research with the answers and depth of insight that it was looking for.

We identified the emergent methodology of autoethnography (see Hesse-Biber and Levy 2006) as providing a framework to properly and fully investigate, the lived experience of the PM practitioner in the Thredbo example. Creswell (2007, p.123) recommends that 'individuals wanting to study themselves and their own experiences turn to autoethnography'. The approach is championed by Ellis and Bochner (2000, p.737), with Ellis stating: 'I don't use grounded theory much anymore... most of what I do is autoethnography...I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try and understand and experience as a story. Then I write my experience as a story'.

At this point, we may expect a level of awkwardness from the reader. At one level it sounds very honest, to the degree of being labelled new-age, for a PM practitioner to admit to feelings, thoughts and emotions rather than purely paying homage to key performance indicators. Such discomfort is understandable, as it forces us to look, with intersubjectivity, at what is real and important – our relationship with self and other. Drawing on the work of Ellis and Bochner (1996) and Goodall (1998), Spry (2001, p.711) suggests 'Autoethnographers argue that self-reflexive critique upon one's positionality as a researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts'. If such an approach heralds a new human dimension to PM discourse, then the profession (and the individuals that comprise it) can only become stronger on many levels.

So what is autoethnography? it is both an approach to writing and a research methodology that insists on forging a connection between personal identity and cultural forces, in a way that looks beyond what facts and generalisations offer towards meaning, understanding, and social criticism (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

Autoethnography is an emergent method in social research that developed mainly out of the tradition of qualitative research, using autobiographical data as both a direct and indirect source (Hesse-Biber and Levy 2006). More precisely, it points to an intersection between autobiography and ethnography, where the cultural informant's own voice rewrites and reclaims authority from the genre of participant observer methodology (Chiu 2004).

Whilst the term was introduced almost three decades ago, it is Pratt (1992), Reed-Danahay (1997), Sparkes (2000), and Ellis and Bochner (Ellis and Bochner 2000), who have been largely credited with promoting autoethnography as a recognised and accepted research methodology. Over sixty peer reviewed articles have been published on the subject of autoethnography since 2002, the majority discussing applications of autoethnography. Whilst hitherto relatively unknown as a methodology for project management research, autoethnography has gained increased acceptance over the last two to three years in particular. By providing the researcher with a voice, it reduces the distance between the researcher, the researched, and the reader in a way that allows the lived experience of the PM practitioner to be far more accessible to a broader, connected, and empathetic audience.

Appropriate to understanding the lived experience, autoethnography places the researcher (in this case the PM practitioner) as the primary participant / subject and foregrounds experience as a meaning making enterprise. As we identified above, the researcher needs a framework, or lens, through which to view, interpret, and thus find meaning from the reflection of the lived experience. In our example, the lens goes beyond the constraints of PMBoK, to find expression for meaning by combining the ideas and lexicon of the Chicago School of Sociology and the Continental Philosophers in a project management context.

In the context of the PM practitioners experience on the Alpine Way Reconstruction, autoethnography was successfully engaged to collect and manage the data. The data was then analysed using seven key concepts from our imported lexicon: the self, self-concept and the generalised other; the conversation of gestures; taking the role of the other; meanings; intersubjectivity; human interaction as a stage play; and, impression management. Without the depth of reflection afforded by an autoethnographic inquiry, key insights would have been excluded from the analysis.. Whilst a detailed interpretation of case specific data is not the intent of this short paper, it is sufficient to note that the rich data and description of the lived experience of the PM practitioner was analysed through these seven concepts. The process proved a cathartic and confronting experience for the practitioner. It highlighted that the description of the lived experiences revealed that concurrently with the technical process, there are many important social processes in projects. These often go unrecorded. The insights demonstrated the inadequacy of the PMBoK and current PM framework to describe the PM practice and the lived experience of the project manager, albeit that the technical process, applications, and tools are largely underpinned by human interaction. The analysis reinforced the existence and importance of intersubjectivity between the PM practitioner and the multiple stakeholders involved in any given project.

The seven concepts drawn from the Chicago School of Sociology and the Continental Philosophers provided the PM practitioner with the intellectual apparatus to recognise, through an autoethnographic inquiry, their own thoughts, feelings and experiences and to better understand those of others. The concepts enabled this research to provide a vocabulary and a meaningful description of the lived experience of the project manager, drawing important insights not readily acknowledged by the current PMBoK and standard PM literature. In so doing, it enabled the drama and excitement of real projects to be highlighted – a component that Morris (1994) has previously argued is missing from much of the PM literature.

By providing a rich vocabulary to the PM practitioner and combining it with the methodological framework afforded by autoethnography, we have broken the rules to offer a robust theoretical framework that enables the introspective project manager to find their voice. We conclude by asserting that autoethnography offers researchers an important additional methodology to understand and express the complexity of human interaction in project management.

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