



Deconstructing project management: a gender analysis of project management guidelines

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Abstract

Strong isomorphic forces are at work in the emerging project management profession. At the same time, competent project management practice is evolving and expanding to include both soft and hard skills. Contemporary gender scholarship purports that these different skill sets are founded on inherently gendered logic systems. Thus, questions regarding the role of masculine and feminine logic systems in project management become increasingly important. We deconstruct portions of one of the pre-eminent isomorphic forces at work today—the Project Management Body of Knowledge® (PMBOK)—to initiate discussion on the ways in which gendered logic systems play a role in generally-accepted project management practice.

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1. Introduction

Project management has been characterized as a “macho profession” [1,2]. As the profession confronts the growing need to manage expectations, relationships and trust [3,4], this style of behaviour is being called into question. As this profession evolves, scholars are noting a shift from a discipline based on technology and control to a focus on interactions and learning [5]. This trend towards accepting the “softer” side of project management appears to correlate with the increasing acceptance of feminine strengths legitimized by literature in organizational theory, management, and the sciences. In this context, questions regarding the role of masculinity and femininity become increasingly important to the emerging profession.

Examination of masculinities and femininities is contentious in organizational research, generally because

people view masculine behaviour as outside the realm of possibility or appropriateness for women, and feminine behaviour as outside the respectable capacities of men. Taking our lead from developmental theories that claim that healthy adult life involves moving toward wholeness, we argue that both male and female project managers need to understand the differences inherent in masculine and feminine ways of managing projects and claim the strengths of both approaches.

Ultimately, the practice of project management is influenced by the textual representation of appropriate practice. Every document contains implicit assumptions that influence readers’ choices of appropriate behaviours and ways of thinking—texts support some ways of thinking and discourage others. This research deconstructs an important socialization document produced by the Project Management Institute (PMI) to illuminate implicit assumptions and their implications for the practice of project management.

Our motive in this endeavour is straightforward: as long as the underlying logic in a profession remains implicit and undiscussed, members remain captive of an untheorized regime, limited in their capacity to see choices about how they work and lead others [6]. To

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introduce these issues, we review the theory of isomorphism and PMI's role as an isomorphic force in the emerging project management profession, highlight management research into the gendered nature of thought and action at work, present our methodological approach to this piece of work, and discuss findings from our preliminary textual analysis.

2. Isomorphism in project management

Isomorphism [7] is the process whereby individuals in widely varying corporate environments tend to think and behave in highly similar ways. This similarity arises because of internalized beliefs about what it means to be, in our case, a project manager. The project management occupational community, through vehicles such as publications, comprises a potent interpretation system [8] that models professional conduct for individuals. In the process of defining and promoting professional competence, this community implicitly endorses certain cognitive and external behaviours while discouraging others.

2.1. Role of PMI and PMBOK in isomorphism

Since 1969, the Project Management Institute has been the predominant professional association for project managers in North America and, some would argue, worldwide. It has taken a stewardship role in promoting the establishment of project management training standards, training, education, and research, and has grown to amass a global membership of over 90,000 in 2002 [9]. A key drive for the organization has been the spread of understanding and appreciation for the skills and behaviours collectively termed *project management*.

A central aspect of this mandate is the certification program resulting in the designation Project Management Professional (PMP®). Central to this training program is the Guide to The Project Management Body of Knowledge (or PMBOK® [52]), a 216-page manual that identifies the “generally-accepted” body of project management knowledge, providing a common language for project managers and common standards of project management quality, excellence, and professionalism. As a documented standard of how project managers ought to construct and define their success, PMBOK provides powerful messages about legitimate ways of thinking and behaving.

In North America, PMBOK is among the profession's most recognized and relied-upon expressions of what it is project managers know how to do. Thus, an exploration of the PMBOK will provide insights into the assumptions about work and skills reflected in today's practice of project management.

3. Gendered modes of thought and action

A growing body of literature supports the view that assumptions about work, skills, and perceptions of success, are inherently gendered [10–14]. (Silvia Gherardi [12] points out that the very word ‘work’ in many languages is masculine.) While the historical dominance of men in organizations is no longer the case, the dominance of masculinity in most workplaces remains. Fletcher [22] asserts that important feminine work activity such as team building and conflict resolution are rendered ‘non-work’ in today's highly technical, male dominated work environments. This intimates, she suggests, the “deeply interior silencing process” at work in apparently ‘gender-neutral’ organizational theory and practice which makes invisible the very skills and activities we recognize as crucial in today's project environments.

While men and women have differing tendencies to utilize certain sensemaking styles and exhibit certain types of skills, individuals of either sex are capable of both masculine- and feminine-gendered ways of knowing and behaving, in varying blends at different times and life circumstances [15,16]. While neither style is the exclusive nor intrinsic strength or liability of men or women, the observed tendency of certain logic systems underlying the behaviours of men and women over time have resulted in the terms *masculine* and *feminine*. Either tendency can be present in a biological male or female [16–21], and in varying degrees, both sets of capacities are present in any healthy individual.

3.1. Masculine modes of thought and action

Masculine sensemaking tends to value independence, self-sufficiency, separation, power deriving from hierarchical authority [22], competitiveness [23], and analytical and impersonal problem solving [18,19,24–26]. Individuals with strong masculine styles hold a value system focusing on mastery over their environment [19,26–28]. They apply objective and impersonal criteria to decision-making, taking an adversarial stance in evaluating information [16,17,29]. Their reasoning styles detach them from the individuals and situations they seek to understand. This detachment is termed ‘field independence,’ and manifests in a person's preference to fidelity and conformance to predetermined models of project reality, and preference to execute tasks according to those predetermined views, regardless of the peculiarities of the specific situation [30,50].

Individuals with highly developed masculine behaviours tend to exhibit strengths in acting decisively, and maintaining an appearance of assertiveness, masterfulness, and control [15]—often collectively termed agentic qualities [31]. Individuals with strong masculine managerial skills tend to be highly task-oriented, excel at

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