

# A memetic paradigm of project management

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## Abstract

This paper aims to fuel the discussion on examining project management research from different perspectives. A new *memetic* approach to project management is presented that promotes a new way to examine the discipline of project management. Project management is claimed to be a memplex with the language and stories of its scholars and practitioners at its core; shaping and restricting human behaviour, and creating impoverished mental models of project management. The paper suggests that a new memetic approach to project management will help lift restrictions imposed by the traditional research approach, and enrich our mental maps of project management to serve us better.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite decades of research and experience, project management (PM) still fails to live up to the expectations of stakeholders as they continue to be disappointed by project results [1–3]. Söderland [4] and others [5,6] argue that a possible cause for poor project results is that scholars and practitioners still do not really understand the nature of projects, and that too much research effort has been directed towards clarifying the reasons for project success and failure, while downplaying research on why projects exist and behave as they do. Moreover, Söderland [4] suggests that to highlight the weaknesses of current PM research we should be pursuing questions such as; Why do project organisations exist, why do they differ, and how do they behave? What is the function of, or value added by, the PM unit? However, these questions still presuppose that we understand what a project is, and what the management of one means.

I believe we will not find answers to these questions or further our understanding of projects and their management by using our current research approach to PM [7,8]. I suggest a new “memetic” approach is required. One that requires us to consider that most of what we call a project and what it is to manage one is an illusion; a human construct about a collection of feelings, expectations [9], and sensations, cleverly conjured up, fashioned, and conveniently labelled by the human brain. Moreover, it requires us to consider that our reasons for using projects and PM are not consciously driven to maximise profit. Scholars and practitioners will be required to consider PM as naturally occurring, self-serving, evolving and designing organisations for its own purpose. Abandoning our current PM knowledge will not be required; however a memetic approach will compel us to examine it, redirecting our attention to previously hidden aspects of PM enquiry. Rather than posing questions such as “why do project organisations exist,” we can ask, “what are we able to see, think, or talk about if we conceive PM in a memetic way?”

Throughout this paper I refer to a traditional approach to PM research. Traditional meaning the

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Table 1  
Impact of memetic approach to aspects of project management

Aspects of PM	Traditional approach	Memetic approach	Impact of memetic approach on PM
Evolution	PM evolves for the good of the organisation and individual	PM evolves for the good of the PM memes	PM is self-serving. It does not serve the individual or organisation
Study and practice	PMBOK <sup>®</sup> is a human construct, consciously designed, created and implemented	PMBOK <sup>®</sup> has evolved by memetic selection. PMBOK <sup>®</sup> alters its environment to increase the number of projects	PMBOK <sup>®</sup> validity reduced
Project manager/ Project team	Strategy to implement organisational objectives	Actors created by PM memes	Traditional role of project manager is questioned. Team creative output is a product of memetic evolution
Profession	PMI <sup>®</sup> is a human construct, consciously designed, created and implemented	PMI <sup>®</sup> has evolved by memetic selection to spread PM memes	The PMI <sup>®</sup> is the way the PM memplex spreads PM
Knowledge creation	Knowledge is constructed by a social system (scholars and practitioners)	Knowledge processes (memes) construct social systems (scholars and practitioners)	A new way of questioning the bastions of PM knowledge
Project organisations	Project organisations are human constructs, consciously designed and created	Project organisations are created by the replicating behaviour of PM memes	Project organisations will prevail at the expense of the individual

current approach, with underlying mental models which have been extended with many variations on a theme to inform management theory [10]. These traditional models regard organisations as human constructs. An underlying assumption of a traditional approach to PM research assumes that an organisation is an entity in its own right, with structures and systems that can be changed for the purpose of organisational improvement.

In this paper I will put forward an argument for a change from the traditional to a memetic approach to PM research. Such an approach will make an impact on many aspects of PM, such as; how it evolves, how it is studied and practiced, the role of the project manager, the project team and the profession. Moreover, it will make an impact on our view of the PM body of knowledge (BoK) and the role of project organisations. Table 1 summarises aspects of PM that are discussed in detail in this paper, highlighting the traditional vs. memetic approach to PM, and emphasising the impact of a new memetic paradigm.

## 2. Traditional vs. memetic approach

There is a major difference between the traditional approach and a memetic approach to PM research which can be illustrated by describing the shift in scientific thinking about the theory of evolution during the mid-20th century.

Traditionally, biological evolution considered evolution occurring for the good of the species. Random genetic changes produce mutations in offspring, enabling a species to innovate and adapt to a changing environment, and natural selection eliminates unfit organisms

from the landscape as a result of competing for finite resources.

Theories of cultural evolution have drawn strong parallels between biological evolution and the evolution of civilization, economy, and culture [10–12]. A traditional approach to cultural and economic evolution considers evolution occurring for the good of the organisation (species). Individuals (organisms) and organisations (species) are considered to compete against each other for finite resources and adapting to the economic landscape [12,13]. Fullmer [13] uses this traditional approach when arguing that one organisational structure for successful adaptation is the use of teams and PM.

In the mid-20th century a new “selfish-gene” approach to biological evolution began that considers evolution occurring for the good of the genes [14]. In this approach it is the genes which are successful, or not, at replicating and getting passed on into the next generation. All biological life therefore, with all its complexity and subtlety is driven by the replicating behaviour of genes.

Dawkins [14] takes this point beyond biology to cultural life suggesting that “all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities”. Moreover, he and others [15,16] argue that there are non-biological or cultural replicators – memes. Memes can be considered to be recipes or instruction manuals for doing something cultural [15]; behaviours, words, or sounds that are copied from person to person. A memetic approach to cultural and economic evolution considers evolution occurring for the good of the memes. All cultural life therefore, including PM, is driven by the replicating behaviour of memes.

To apply memetic theory to PM we must treat memes as replicators in their own right. Within the context of

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