

A Heideggerian paradigm for project management: Breaking free of the disciplinary matrix and its Cartesian ontology



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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the new insights that emerge if key concepts in Heidegger's magnum opus *Being and Time* are applied to the phenomena of projects and their management. A theoretical approach is adopted with an introduction being provided to key Being and Time concepts, followed by the application of these concepts to the phenomena of projects and their management. A particular focus is on the relevance of Heidegger's ontology in underpinning the exploration of the 'lived experience' of project management and the disclosing of the actuality of project phenomena. It is found that key concepts in Heidegger's *Being and Time* (such as *temporality*, *modes of being*, *being-in-the-world*, *dealing* and the *they*) provide insights into various aspects of project management. The significance of such findings is demonstrated through a reconceptualisation of projects; and differentiation between, and reconceptualisation of project management versus project managing.
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1. Introduction

Heidegger's *Being and Time* provides an alternative paradigm for considering the phenomena of projects. Traditionally, project research and practice has been underpinned by a Cartesian paradigm. Bredillet (2010) provides a detailed discussion of the theoretical perspectives, ontologies and epistemologies of the nine project management schools; identifying that four of these schools are underpinned solely by positivism and the remaining five have positivist components. The necessity to explore the use of a paradigm that breaks fully from this positivist perspective has been instigated by the 'lived experience' of project management discourse. This paper explores the application of Heidegger's *Being and Time* as an alternative ontology that can underpin a shift to a non-positivist paradigm for exploring projects and this aligns with the 'lived experience' discourse.

This paper provides a brief overview of the literature related to this exploration. Key concepts of *Being and Time* are introduced

and applied to the phenomena of project management. The discussion draws together a selection of insights from the theoretical exploration to demonstrate the significance of adopting such a paradigm. For example, we disclose the experiential differences between operational versus project work and project management and project managing. Because of space limitations this paper cannot provide a comprehensive identification of all insights that can emerge from a Heideggerian perspective. But it is a beginning. A detailed comparison of the outcomes of the Heideggerian insights to current perspectives or project management schools is also outside the scope of this conceptual investigation, and no doubt a paper topic in itself.

2. Literature overview

2.1. *Disappointment in delivery yet 'growth' in the discipline*

We need not delve far into the project management literature, or indeed mainstream media to see the ongoing dissatisfaction with projects and project management research (Bloch et al., 2012; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006b; Geraldi et al.,

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2011; KPMG, 2013; McHugh and Hogan, 2011; PM Solutions Research, 2011; Thomas, 2006; Winter et al., 2006; Zwikael and Bar-Yoseph, 2004). Despite this, there continues to be a commitment by organisations to pursuing project management; ongoing growth in the number of project management methods/models/tools available; and in the uptake of certifications and memberships offered by the project management associations (Project Management Institute, 2014; Wells, 2012). This situation begs the question, ‘if projects are not delivering, why is project management as a discipline continuing to grow?’

2.2. Project management schools and theoretical perspectives

As per Bredillet (2004), project management has evolved from a positivist paradigm and this dominates traditional tools, techniques and methods. Bredillet (2004, pp. 1–2) highlights that this foundation may be leading to the problems that have been noted in practice and is a “barrier to effective understanding and communication of the true nature of project management”. Bredillet (2010) also provides a detailed discussion of the nine ‘schools of project management’, outlining their respective ontological, epistemological and theoretical perspectives. Smyth and Morris (2007) sampled the literature and found that over 66% of articles had a dominant positivist research epistemology. The literature was also examined by Pollack (2007) in terms of the soft versus hard paradigms. It was found that project management is predominately grounded in the hard paradigm associated with positivism. However, there is a growth in the adoption of a soft paradigm in the literature that is associated with an interpretivist epistemology.

2.3. Move to ‘lived experience’/being/becoming

The Rethinking Project Management network (Winter et al., 2006) was a milestone in redirecting our thinking about projects and their management. This has been followed by a growing commentary on the need to capture the ‘lived experience’ of project management (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006a; Cicmil et al., 2006; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Lineham and Kavanagh, 2006; Smyth and Morris, 2007). Such discussions include concepts such as project management as “becoming” rather than “being” (Chia, 2013; Lineham and Kavanagh, 2006) and adopting new research methods that embrace the relevance of context (Blomquist et al., 2010; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006b; Drouin et al., 2013, Section 2; Smyth and Morris, 2007).

The being/becoming discussion is of particular relevance to this paper as it recognises the ontological shift that is required to understand the ‘lived experience’ of project management. Being ontology focuses on objects, things and states in an objectified and discrete manner. The becoming ontology is interested in activity, process and dynamics (Lineham and Kavanagh, 2006). The becoming approach is in stark contrast to traditional project management ontology which is largely positivist and aligned with traditional, objectified scientific paradigms (Bredillet, 2010; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006b; Lineham and Kavanagh, 2006; O’Leary and Williams, 2013; Packendorff, 1995; Smyth and Morris, 2007).

With the exception of this move towards a becoming ontology, there is minimal discussion in project management regarding the ontology underpinning project management research and practice. Exceptions include a study by Smyth and Morris (2007) and Ahlemann et al. (2013) on the paradigms (and lack thereof) underpinning project management research; and Morris (2013) and Gauthier and Ika (2012) discussions on ontologies in project management, including: realist perspectives, to post-modern and hyper-modern (i.e. becoming rather than being).

The drive towards understanding the ‘lived experience’ has been most evident in discussion and application of alternative research methods (Nocker, 2006; O’Leary and Williams, 2013; Wells, 2012). We would highlight that these alternative epistemologies and research methods can only provide truly new insights (and demonstrate research methodology integrity (Cicmil, 2006; Drisko, 1997; Gauthier and Ika, 2012; Saunders et al., 2009)) if there is a strong ontological foundation that aligns the research objectives, its epistemology, and research method.

2.4. Heidegger in the project management literature

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1962) offers an ontological alternative to Cartesian subject-object dualism that, since Descartes, has not only underpinned the majority of positivist research (Laverty, 2008; Orlikowski, 2009), but also dominated Western thinking at-large (Grof, 1983; Seigel, 2005). The potential application of Heidegger’s thinking has already been raised in the project management literature. For example, Sewchurran (2008a) highlighted an alignment between projects as objects versus ‘lived experiences’ and Heidegger’s comparison of theoretical attitude and signification, and makes a case for an alternative approach to the education of project practitioners. Sewchurran’s (2008b) dissertation highlighted that whilst there is a drive towards empirical work that explores the ‘lived experience’ of project management there is a need for an ontological shift to support this epistemological/methodological shift. Subsequently, Sewchurran draws on Heidegger and others to create a regional ontology to underpin debates in, and to improve information systems project management coherence (Sewchurran et al., 2010).

Bredillet et al. (2013) draw on Heidegger from a praxis or projects as practice perspective. Muller et al. (2013) recognise Heidegger in terms of his influence on the practice turn. In Cicmil et al. (2006) Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* is specifically referenced to highlight the concept of an involved-in-the-world-manager.

Such discussions have focused on particular components of Heidegger’s work or have drawn on this philosophical approach as part of broader discourse. Consequently, there remains an opportunity to devote attention to a broad range of Heidegger’s concepts and consider what specific insights they may provide to the phenomena of projects and their management at the level of fundamental ontology. Indeed, and as raised by Söderlund (2004), surely understanding what *is* project management and what is it to *be* a project manager is foundational to

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