

# Putting theory to practice or practising theory? How theories of practice can be practically useful in the management of projects

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I question the knowledge-practice divide by drawing inspiration from contemporary interest in practice-based theories. I focus on recent renewed interest in the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* (or, to put simply, the doing of practical wisdom). Rather than to turn knowledge into practice – as the theme of this symposium suggests – I argue that knowledge is practice. I stress that practical knowledge is not just what practitioners do; practical knowledge calls for deeper, more engaged forms of practical scholarship. Such scholarship demands a move away from ‘grab-and-go’ methods of knowledge creation depicted by earlier scholarship that provided prescriptive guidelines and toolkits, to consider the power of engaged scholarship (e.g. action research, ethnography) in co-creating practical wisdom in project management. I offer the newly-launched Professional Doctorate in Project Management at the University of Manchester as a possible way of inviting practitioners to become co-researchers in putting practical wisdom to work.

**Keywords:** *phronesis*, practice-relevant scholarship, professional doctorate

## INTRODUCTION

Project management has matured as a field from being “almost theory-free” (Morris, 2013b: 67) and “extraordinarily [silent] on the theoretical” (Koskela and Howell, 2002: 293), to current recognition that project management knowledge is pluralistic, drawing on a diverse range of theories (see Söderlund, 2011, and; Morris, 2013a). In part, this growing acknowledgement of the role of theory is due to the belief that “a theory of projects is beneficial to the development and acceptance of the field for a general audience” (Hällgren, 2012: 805). As Hällgren (2012: *ibid.*) noted, the more established top-tier academic journals tend to make higher “demands for theoretical contributions and scientific rigor [...] than in journals in less established areas as project management”.

The pursuit of theoretical rigour is nevertheless not without criticism. Morris (2013b), for instance, while acknowledging the need to embrace theoretical pluralism, also warned against the development of theory for theory’s sake. He stressed that “[t]he problems we face in the world of projects, and the ways to address them, are often intensely practical. [...] Yet, academics too rarely experience the reality of really managing projects” (Morris, 2013b: 69).

In this paper, I critically consider this bifurcation between theory and practice, along with the debate on the role of theory in project management. In so doing, the purpose is to question the rhetoric of *turning knowledge into practice*. Such a turn of phrase implies the separation between theory and practice, an assumption that knowledge is an entity that comes before its application in practice. In this paper, it is argued that such a linear view of knowledge production that emphasises the dichotomous distinction between theory and practice is outmoded. By drawing on current interest in and scholarship on practice-based theories (see e.g. de Certeau, 1984, and; Nicolini, 2012), it is argued that the problem lies not in turning knowledge into practice, but to situate knowledge production and reproduction in practice. Thus, theory is not some isolated entity that precedes and juxtaposes against practice (theory vs. practice); rather, practice and theory are both sides of the same coin, recursively intertwined and mutually constitutive of one another.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section will trace the debate on project management theory. This brief overview will outline the ongoing debate on the role of theory in project management, between those who favour a normative view of finding better or ‘best’ practice (e.g. Morris, 2013a; 2013b), and those who reject such normative accounts and prefer to study the multiple ways in which practices actually happen (e.g. Cicmil *et al.*, 2006). Although the debate on theoretical unification/pluralism has made much progress on bringing theory to the fore, the review highlights the need to break away from the theory-practice divide. A salient review of practice-based approach to understanding project management and what project managers do is then outlined, with a view to reconnect theory and practice in project management. The paper closes with an illustration of how this can be achieved through the Manchester Professional Doctorate Programme.

## **PROJECT MANAGEMENT ‘THEORY’? FROM UNIFICATION TO PLURALISM**

Historically, project management is regarded as a practical field where knowledge about managing projects was, until the 1950s, rarely institutionalised (see e.g. Morris, 2013a, and; Garel, 2013). Garel (2013) traced the history of project management, and noted that since the late 1950s, project management knowledge began to go through intense rationalisation and institutionalisation. The creation of various bodies of knowledge by institutions such as the Project Management Institute (PMI) and the Association of Project Management (APM) marked the foundation of ‘standard’ models of project management (Garel, 2013; see also Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007). Koskela and Howell (2002) even gone as far as to state that there is underlying theory in project management found in the doctrine “as espoused in the [Project Management Body of Knowledge] PMBOK Guide by PMI and mostly applied in practice” (p. 293).

Early formalisation and professionalization of project management knowledge stemmed from the fields of operations management and the management of engineering projects. At its core, this early theoretical formulation was about advancing a normative set of principles for delivering best practices in project

management. As Koskela and Howell (2002) asserted, “[a] theory of project management should be prescriptive: it should reveal how action contributes to the goals set to it. On the most general level, there are three possible actions: design of the systems employed in designing and making; control of those systems in order to realize the production intended; improvement of those systems” (p. 294). They added that the ultimate goal should be seen in terms of producing products as intended, by optimising costs and resource utilization, while satisfying the needs of the customer through measures such as quality, dependability and flexibility.

Söderlund (2004a) commented that such normative tradition yielded a wealth of “checklists and the optimization and critical success factors research” (p. 185), which he argued “provide very little in terms of theory” (*ibid.*). Söderlund (2004b) also called for the need to broaden the scope on researching projects, expanding what we mean by the ‘project’ to consider multi-project contexts within a firm, inter-firm coordination of projects and project ecologies. In so doing, Söderlund (2004b) and other critical scholars (e.g. Winter *et al.*, 2006, Cicmil *et al.*, 2006, and; Hodgson and Cicmil 2007) extended the narrow conceptualisation of the ‘project’, and went beyond instrumental approaches of addressing execution problems in the project life cycle found in much earlier scholarship. As Hodgson and Cicmil (2007) famously argued, the question lies not in “What is a project?”, but “What do we do when we call something “a project”?” (p. 432). In a similar vein, Cicmil *et al.* (2006) stressed that project management practice is “a *social conduct*, defined by history, context, individual values and wider structural frameworks” (p. 676; original *emphasis*).

In questioning the contours of what constitutes the ‘project’, and in shifting the focus on the lived experiences as opposed to the laws of project management, these critical scholars opened up the study of project management beyond the confines of operational research and engineering principles of planning and control. A corollary of this is the broadening of the relevance of project management scholarship to the wider fields of management and organisational studies in the academy (see e.g. Söderlund, 2004b; Kwak and Anbari, 2009, and; Jacobsson *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, Söderlund (2011) reviewed 305 articles and categorised project management scholarship into seven ‘schools of thought’ (see also Söderlund and Maylor, 2012). Marshall and Bresnen (2013), by reinterpreting the narratives of Brunel’s Thames Tunnel, offered alternative discourses that transcended the techno-rational, planning approach; apart from the planning discourse, Marshall and Bresnen viewed the Thames Tunnel from the perspectives of messy practices of muddling through; a constellation that connected people, things and ideas; a negotiation of power relations, and; a societal construction.

These alternative conceptualisations and ‘schools of thought’ characterise contemporary scholarship of project management which was, as Jacobsson *et al.* (2015) suggested, borne out of “a reaction to PMI being a dominating institution in terms of providing guidelines, [...] prescriptions and tools” (p. 11). Lenfle and Loch (2010) put it strongly as they argued that focussing exclusively on engineering-execution brings damage to the project management discipline because such

normative approach denies companies “a powerful weapon in innovating and evolving strategy” (p. 49). Lenfle and Loch (2010) added that “companies *do* apply trial-and-error and parallel approaches in their novel projects because they have no choice, but in doing so they go against their professional PM training rather than being supported by it” (*ibid.*; original *emphasis*).

Thus, in theorising project management, there appears to be a debate generated between two main camps of scholars. On the one hand, there are those calling for a unified, general theory of project management; on the other hand, there are those who take the view that project management can be viewed from multiple theoretical lenses. This debate is, by no means, settled. Pinto and Winch (2016), for instance, while acknowledging the tussle between those who favour the emergence of a single theory and those who see project management knowledge as pluralistic, maintained that the “[a]rticulation of the discipline as a whole requires a coherent theoretical perspective on the discipline, otherwise bodies of knowledge become mere lists of areas and sub-areas of knowledge with little insight into how the areas link to form a coherent set of competencies and how their relative importance varies contingently” (p. 241). It is this tension between the universal (objective) and the particular (subjective) that we turn to the next section, in which more recent practice-based based scholarship is reviewed.

## **PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE BEYOND MODERN AND POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES**

In a recent call to reconnect theory and practice in project management, Bredillet *et al.* (2015) contrasted between the modern and postmodern turns in project management. The former depicted by early formulations of project management theory focuses on answering the question of what (best) practice is, while the latter characterised by a growing body of critical scholarship considers the multiple realities of what practitioners do. Put another way, whereas the modernist turn produces objective knowledge about the rules of project management practices, the postmodernist turn places more emphasis on the subjective, situated context of what goes on when doing projects.

A practice-based approach provides a useful vantage point for breaking free from the object-subject (Cartesian) duality (e.g. Bjørkeng *et al.*, 2009; Bredillet *et al.*, 2015, and; van der Hoorn and Whitty, 2015). As Bjørkeng *et al.* (2009), drawing on the phenomenologist Alfred Schütz, noted, “no practice can be understood outside its intersubjectively created meaning and motive, which [...] are socially reinforced, constructed and ascribed” (p. 146). They added that practices “reduce the scope and ordering power of a disembodied, asocial and acontextual (Cartesian) concept of reason by reconceptualising reason as a practice phenomenon [...] grounded in what members find it normal to do. Thus, practice defines its own rationality” (*ibid.*).

There is a contemporary movement in project management scholarship that focusses on the lived experiences of project management practitioners. Rather than to take as given the primacy of rules and guidelines, more recent practice-based scholarship

opens up the inquiry to question how practitioners do and make do (improvise upon) these rules. As de Certeau (1984) in *The Practice of Everyday Life* assert, an emphasis on everyday practices calls into doubt the common assumption that practitioners are “passive and guided by established rules” (p. xi). Nicolini (2012) also stressed that practice precedes any theory (or theorising), as he argued

“Mundane everydayness thus becomes the received, yet necessarily indeterminate, cultural manifold within which we are all immersed, and which meaningfully discloses our world by way of our own un-theorized, everyday practical coping strategies [...] Practice is therefore ‘prior’ to representation. Everydayness is always already a holistic affair and is experience as gestalt, i.e. as a meaningful whole.” (p. 35)

Nicolini (2012) traced the origins of practice-based theories, and noted that the separation between theory and practice stemmed from classical Greek philosophy, most notably the work of Plato, which has shaped the Western tradition. Within such a frame, theory rules over practice, “[e]very action would in fact be conceived as the application of general, calculable, precise, and truthful principles, while reference to universals, such as to the universal pure idea of ‘good’, would make it always possible to choose the best course of action” (p. 24). Nicolini (2012: 28) added that the demotion of practice in this Western tradition is signified in differentiating between thinkers and doers, for “[t]hose who carry out a life of contemplation are already in contact with the divine while the many others who live a life of practice should expect ‘contemplation’ as the ultimate reward in the afterlife.”

A practice-based approach seeks to correct the false dichotomy between thinking (theory) and doing (practice). Much contemporary scholarship and interest into practice-based approach owes much to the writings of Marx (see Bjørkeng *et al.*, 2009, and; Nicolini, 2012), who regarded thought and world as

“always connected through human activity and therefore cannot be separated: on the one hand, man is always an actor and a produced; on the other hand, thinking is only one of the things people do, together with running, fighting, making love, and so on.” (Nicolini, 2012: 30)

Thus, a practice-based approach views practice and knowledge as cut out of the same cloth. For de Certeau (1984: 69), practical “know-how (*savoir-faire*) finds itself slowly deprived of what objectively articulated it with respect to a “how-to-do” (*un faire*). [...] Thus know-how takes on the appearance of an “intuitive” or “reflex” ability, which is almost invisible and whose status remains unrecognized.” A classic example used to illustrate this lies in the practice of hammering a nail; one does not need to think and articulate the objects ‘hammer’ or ‘nail’ prior to applying such thinking in the action of hammering a nail. Thus, a practice turn emphasises the emergent, unconscious and spontaneous, where thinking and doing are recursively intertwined in real time (Bredillet *et al.*, 2015). As Bjørkeng *et al.* (2009) stressed, practice signifies “how we achieve active being-in-the-world” (p. 146).

In Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) *Theory of Practice*, this active being-in-the world is encapsulated in the notion of *habitus*. As Askland *et al.* (2013) explained, *habitus*

helps us understand “the concept of culturally conditioned agency” (p. 120), and describes “enduring, learnt and embodied principles and dispositions for action” (*ibid.*). Räsänen and Löwstedt (2014), also drawing on Bourdieu, explained that “practice is a dynamic interplay between past and present, individual and collective, and between contexts of culture and contexts of situation” (p. 125); in this way “[t]he objective and the subjective are fluid, continuously interacting and relational” (*ibid.*). Rather than to treat practice as a result of compliance with rules and guidelines,

“habitus is better conceived as a way of knowing inscribed in bodies, acquired mostly during upbringing [...] as a by-product of participation in daily activities largely without raising it to the level of discourse. In this sense, it is clear that for Bourdieu habitus is not a way of understanding the world as much as a way of being in the world.”  
(Nicolini, 2012: 56)

Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus* has its roots from Aristotle’s idea of *phronesis*, crudely translated as practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2006). According to Flyvbjerg (2006), *phronesis* makes up one of three intellectual virtues, the other two being *episteme* (or scientific knowledge) and *techne* (pragmatic craft). As Bredillet *et al.* (2015) assert, practice or theory alone is not sufficient. What matters is deliberate action in context. Such deliberate action involves the passing of value judgements, or *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Thus, Bredillet *et al.* (2015) argued that, in the heat of the battle between universal theory and practices in particular contexts, it is important never to lose sight of practical wisdom that is accumulated through knowledge in and from practice. In laying the foundation of practice-relevant scholarship, Antonacopoulou (2010) was keen to move beyond the labels ‘scholar’ and ‘practitioner’, preferring to consider the proposition that “we are all practitioners” (p. 221). Rather than to co-produce knowledge between scholars (thinkers) and practitioners (doers), Antonacopoulou (2010) urged for all practitioners to become co-researchers. She suggested that practice-relevant scholarship involved the dynamic interplay between practice that generates purposeful action, *phronesis* (or practical wisdom) that is the result of reflexive critique, and the practitioner who is constantly learning to connect practice *and* theory. It is to this end that we offer the Professional Doctorate Programme in Project Management as a way of accomplishing practice-relevant scholarship.

### **CLOSING REMARKS: RECONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE THROUGH THE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE PROGRAMME**

A brief outline has so far been presented on historical developments of project management as a field and the roles played by theory and practice. This salient review highlighted the shift away from the pursuit of normative, prescriptive theories that offer ‘how-to-do’ guides to project management, towards emphasising the lived experiences of what project management practitioners do. Despite this move from the universal to the particular, the checklists and critical success factors type research still prevail in the field. Consequently, Reich *et al.* (2013) bemoaned that “[...] much project management research is “mired in the middle”, neither sufficiently rigorous for the academy nor sufficiently insightful for practitioners” (p. 938). The research dismissed by Reich *et al.* (2013) would fit what Van de Ven (2007) termed

as “unengaged or disengaged studies” (p. 273); such studies tend to raise questions without evidence of their prevalence in practice, rely on a single theoretical model without consideration of alternatives, be based on research design that took the researcher out of the practical context, and bore little impact on practice.

In moving beyond the theory (*episteme*) – practice (*techne*) divide, the preceding section highlighted a need to draw on practice-based approaches to bring to the fore how practitioners deliberate in action using what is known as practical wisdom (*phronesis*). It is in this vein that the Professional Doctorate Programme in Project Management at Manchester is designed. This programme, to be launched in 2016, builds on the success of the Project Management Professional Development Programme (PMPDP), which has been running for over 15 years with some evidence that indicate the transformative power graduates have in becoming effective change agents in the workplace as a result (see Alam *et al.*, 2008). The experience from the PMPDP has illustrated how blending academic research and on-the-job practice can benefit not only the delegate attending the programme, but also act as a powerful means of introducing effective organisational change at the workplace. While organisations have conventionally made use of consultants as a way of seeking external validation to their problem-solving approaches, there is evidence to show that such an approach often leads to failure because these consultants are normally seen as operating externally to the organisation (see Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). Thus, the Professional Doctorate Programme provides a platform for practitioners to become ‘co-researchers’ (Antonacopoulou, 2010) in order to produce knowledge from and in action (Bredillet *et al.*, 2015) through the interplay of purposeful action, reflexive critique and learning to connect between theory and practice.

As far as it is known, there is currently no provision for the Professional Doctorate Programme on a blended, part-time basis. The closest model in the field is hosted in the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University, where the Doctorate Programme in Project Management requires applicants to have around 8 years’ of relevant professional experience (see Bredillet *et al.*, 2013). However, the RMIT programme allows students to undertake research on a full-time basis, thereby removing the researcher from everyday industrial practice while doing the doctoral studies. The Professional Doctorate Programme in Project Management is distinctive in that the researchers are full-time employees working in their day jobs and building their research around real-life problems in such practical contexts. This would allow them to pursue engaged scholarship (see Van de Ven, 2007) over a sustained period of time (~4-6 years), and to approach their practical project management problem in a holistic and critical way (see Packendorff, 2013).

Instead of theory before practice, delegates on the Professional Doctorate Programme in Project Management are first and foremost practitioners who engage with ongoing reflection and theorising. To enable delegates to learn to connect between theory and practice, and to reflexively critique their purpose and actions, delegates will undergo eight residential taught sessions over the course of their research. These residential sessions principally provide the space and guidance for delegates to develop their

research-in-writing process, so that they can reflect and articulate continuously on the practical and academic impacts achieved through their everyday practice. It is hoped that these sessions would facilitate the practice-relevant scholarship that Antonacopoulou (2010) called for. The eight sessions are summarised below:

- *Introduction to the doctoral research process*: this session covers basic information as to what constitutes a doctoral level achievement, ongoing debates around the concept of ‘doctorateness’, the typical life cycle of the doctorate degree programme, managing the relationship between and expectations of the supervisor(s) and the doctoral researcher, work-life-PhD balance and wellbeing.
- *Managing research and development, and innovation in business*: this session allows delegates to critically reflect on how business organisations manage research and development, creativity and innovation. The purpose is to get delegates to think about the relevance of their doctoral research projects within the context of managing R&D and innovation in their respective firms.
- *Academic writing (1) The literature*: this session is one of a series of sessions aimed at getting delegates to critically reflect on their reading and writing. The session will cover the importance and relevance of the literature to the research process, and offer guidance as to how delegates can go about critically reviewing articles for the purpose of framing their research problem and contribution. Delegates will also explore what constitutes an academic discipline or field of study, and how the politics of academic disciplines and fields can influence the reading and reviewing of the literature.
- *Engaged scholarship*: this session introduces the concept of ‘engaged scholarship’, and situates the discussion on contemporary concerns with research impacts, the debate on relevance versus rigour, and the challenges of co-production research. The session will also cover a range of methodological approaches that can facilitate engaged scholarship, through e.g. action research, ethnographic research (including autoethnographies) and case study research. The purpose of this session is to introduce delegates to a range of methodological approaches that are compatible with undertaking research at the workplace.
- *Research ethics*: undertaking research at such an involved level in the workplace can be ethically problematic. The purpose is to get delegates to reflect on the ethical implications of their work and to explore how thinking about research ethics can improve the framing of questions and dissemination of results. Principles such as voluntary participation and informed consent, ‘do no harm’, confidentiality, and dilemmas of representation will be covered.
- *Academic writing (2) The role of theory and interesting questions*: what is theory and how might theory help in delivering practical impacts of research? This session focuses on the role of theory and why theory is important not only for the PhD but also for framing interesting research questions (e.g. Hällgren, 2012).
- *Research objects*: this session plays on the word ‘object’, and is intended to get delegates to reflect on the range of objects they produce as part of the doctoral research process. These objects could include the research aims and objectives, the end-of-year progression reports, the thesis, the briefing notes that they produce to demonstrate the research impacts to their line managers, research articles



presented in a conference or published in a peer-reviewed journal, PowerPoint presentations of their research delivered at the workplace or professional network, research data (e.g. interview transcripts, audio/video recordings...), and so on. The purpose is to get delegates to reflect on the range of stuff (or objects) they produce and the power of these objects in making a difference at the workplace. Delegates will also reflect on who stands to gain and lose from the research.

- *Academic writing (3) Writing retreat*: in the final session, delegates will be able to go through a two to three-day academic writing retreat. Delegates will prepare a short paper based on their preliminary findings and theoretical framing. The session is intended to help delegates appreciate the intricacies of academic writing, which will help them in structuring the thesis.

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