Thesis Title

The Paradoxes of Project Management:

A Project Management Consultant's Inquiry into the Social Reality of Technology-Driven Change Projects

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This doctoral thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Marianne Gonner-Schmitt, who over the long years of her illness reminded me of the importance of human relationships. The good moments we had during these difficult times opened my mind for inquiring into my life and led me to engage in this doctoral programme.

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Abstract

This thesis is a practice-based inquiry into project management. It adds to the critique of more traditional discourse in project management literature (PMI 20013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009, Agile Alliance Organisation 2001) by drawing on academics and researchers who challenge the claim that the use of project management methods alone can consistently and reliably lead to project management outcomes being delivered within budget, on schedule and to the required specification.

It takes issue with a conception of project management that draws heavily on traditions of thought grounded in realist and systemic theories. Such an understanding of project management builds upon an individualist interpretation of human agency and assumes that human practice develops in linear and therefore predictable and controllable ways. From this perspective, limited attention is paid to intersubjective conflictual relationships as harmonious and consensual teamwork are idealised and detached rational thinking is favoured over emotional involvement.

This thesis identifies ethical concerns with the uncritical implementation of abstracted and reified project management models. Whilst recognising that abstracted frameworks help us to achieve things with others, this thesis argues that these rational models do not represent practice as lived. Rather, this abstract approach may tempt project practitioners into thinking in dualistic categories and thus render them insensitive to their ethical responsibility for a meaningful functionalisation of the generalised models in the social environment that they participate in.

Therefore, this thesis introduces a processual understanding of project management discourse by drawing on the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000), itself based on complexity sciences, process theories and pragmatic philosophy to offer a more nuanced view on the power-laden and emotion-driven aspects of human relating. From this perspective, project practice emerges from an ongoing process of conflictual intersubjective relationships which are paradoxically predictable and unpredictable, and controllable and uncontrollable, all at the same time.

This thesis concludes by arguing for a self-organising, evolving and paradoxical conception of project management practice and theory. This is not meant in the sense of finding a new method or more sophisticated tools to exploit these concepts, nor in

leveraging their potential to deal with the uncertainties caused by the paradoxical tensions arising from this process. Rather, it is meant as another way to understand what is actually going in the social reality of technology-driven change projects, as I believe it is through this new understanding that practice will change in small but still significant ways.

Key words

Project management, paradox, practice, breakdown, emotions, control, power, complex responsive processes of relating.

Key authors

Stacey, Griffin, Mowles, Dewey, Elias, Heidegger, Burkitt, Foucault.

Important note:

For the purposes of preserving anonymity, the names of all individuals, departments, organisations, job titles, locations, etc. have been replaced with fictitious names throughout this thesis.

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1. Thesis Introduction

General Context

Since graduating in business informatics I have worked for more than 25 years in the financial industry in Luxembourg, managing and consulting high-profile technology-driven change programmes.

Through practising this profession over many years in numerous organisations I have increasingly subscribed to the methods promoted by project management theories. These theories are mainly represented by the American Project Management Institute (PMI 2013), which operates worldwide, its European counterpart the International Project Management Association (IPMA 2010), which covers mainly continental Europe, and the project organisation methodology Prince2 (2009), which is predominantly used in UK and northern European countries. These institutions constitute what in this thesis I refer to as traditional project management theories.

Influenced by Stacey's (2011) analysis on contemporary management theories, I came to the conclusion that these project management theories, although differing in their methods and tools, still build on similar ontological and epistemological assumptions drawing from the tradition of realist and systemic theories. The consequence of understanding projects in this way is that it is assumed that project success can be determined by rigid success criteria fixing time, budget and the project scope, as if it were possible to objectify what project success is. This reification then leads project management practitioners to further assume that by using the linear methods promoted by these theories, project outcomes can be predicted and planned, and subsequently measured and controlled by independent individuals able to make rational choices.

From this perspective, it is also taken for granted that a group of individuals from various disciplines across the organisation are able, through harmonious and consensual collaboration, to achieve the projected outcomes. In this way of thinking, conflicts and emotions are avoided, or at best explained away as they are perceived as a hinderance to an efficient processing of a project.

In project management practice, these assumptions often tempt practitioners to believe that this methodological approach is a necessary and sufficient condition for delivering projects.

Motivations for this Research

As a project manager and a consultant in the field of project and change management, I rarely experienced these assumptions playing out in practice. In my projects we frequently struggled to reliably predict project outcomes or define what success meant (cf. research project 2). I often felt that I was not really in control myself with what was going on in my projects despite rigorously applying the prescribed methods. At times, this provoked strong emotions, which further increased my sense of not feeling in control (cf. research project 3). Simultaneously, however, I did not feel that I was completely out of control and that absolutely anything could happen, since I still felt that we had a certain influence over what was taking place.

Furthermore, people did not work harmoniously together, nor did they just do as they were told, as they did not blindly accept the superior logic of a detached and rational argumentation. I perceived these relationships as impregnated by powerful intentions and emotional defences, which led to continuous negotiations to find ways to engage in practice that no one could have planned (cf. research project 4).

This made me doubt assumptions such as predictability of outcomes, total control over project deliverables and over the people who were deemed to deliver them, or the harmonious character of human relationships and the supremacy of detached, rational thinking over emotional involvement.

I am not arguing against the value of project management concepts in this thesis, however, as I do use such frameworks and methods myself all the time. I can see their contribution to practice in that they provide generalised knowledge and thus prevent us from constantly reinventing the proverbial wheel. What I challenge, however, is when these assumptions are uncritically contextualised in practice. These concepts may be necessary but they seem insufficient to explain what is going on while using them in project practice.

In my first research project, a reflexive autobiography, I describe how my search for finding other explanations for what I experienced in project management practice led me, after taking a detour into other theories such as organisational development and psychodynamics, to finally turn to the Doctor of Management (DMan) Programme at the University of Hertfordshire and its theory of complex responsive processes of relating.

Research Context

The Doctor of Management (DMan) programme is a part-time, practiced-based programme where international managers and senior consultants explore questions of concern in their professional practice through four research projects (and a synopsis) in order to make better sense of their experience in a way that is relevant to themselves and others in their field.

In their research, DMan students are invited to critically engage with the theory of complex responsive processes of relating to make sense of their experience. This particular approach was established by the founders of the DMan programme, namely, Ralph Stacey, Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw and mainly draws upon insights from the complexity sciences, process theories and pragmatic philosophy (Mowles 2015a:14).

The DMan approach focuses on the local interactions between individuals, which take the form of gestures and responses, as the basic unit of communication from which all meaning is assumed to emerge. These processes of relating are essentially human interactions, which can only produce further interactions, thus leading Stacey and Griffin to argue that there is no holistic underpinning structure or system which determines these interactions, as promulgated in the dominant discourse. They conclude that the uncertainties that we are confronted with in organisations (and thus I also argue, in projects), can only be dealt with through engaging in these ordinary human interactions. It is in these ongoing complex responsive processes of human relating that paradoxically co-operative conflictual patterns of relationships emerge, in which individuals enable and constrain each other in ways that are predictable and unpredictable, controllable and uncontrollable at the same time. This relational process is, according to Stacey and Griffin, inherently complex due to its self-organising, evolutionary and paradoxical nature (Stacey & Griffin 2005:3–9).

Research approach

Understanding projects as emerging from complex responsive processes of relating also has implications for the research approach to be used. Such an approach should be practice-based and emphasise the local interactions of human relating. Taking these local

interactions seriously means taking our experience seriously, and, more precisely, taking our 'breakdowns' from practice seriously. Breakdowns, in a Heideggerian sense (Heidegger 1962), are those moments in practice where unexpected things happen that make us pause in our absorbed engagement in order to think about what is going on. In this thesis I will demonstrate that it is through these breakdowns in practice that situations matter to us and thus provoke us to think about what we experience.

The consequences of taking these disruptions from practice seriously is that the data of our research is found in the narratives describing our breakdowns from practice. It is in our narratives that these disruptions become evident, as, for example, in my second research project where I describe my disappointment about being told that the project was perceived as a failure even though we met the seemingly objective success criteria, leading me to reflect on how project success is defined and what it means. Or, when in my third research project I became painfully aware that I could neither control the project outcomes nor the people in the project, making me wonder why controlling things was so important to me. Or, when in my fourth research project I was ashamed to admit that I had failed to implement a project management approach and was unable to engage with my client in a meaningful way. All of these disruptions from practice raised feelings that made these narratives matter to me and led me to choose them as data for my research.

In the four sequential research projects for this thesis I describe such narratives and breakdowns and try to make sense of them by using various theories.

Key Argument of this Thesis

In this thesis, I will show, by drawing on my own experience, how an abstract way of understanding our project work led us in practice to focus on what we should do but blinded us to what really went on in our practice and how we contextualise what these generalised theories recommend us to do in simultaneously consensual and conflictual relationships with others.

While reflecting on these experiences using the theories of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin, Shaw, Mowles), and building on Elias' processual sociology, Dewey's concepts of human conduct, Heidegger's theory on breakdown, Foucault's

understanding of power, Burkitt's theory on emotions, as well as on some other practice theorists such as Bourdieu, Shotter, Tsoukas & Sandberg, Chia, Gherardi and Feldman & Orlikowsky, I conclude in this thesis that practice is too complex to be classified in "either…or" categories. I therefore argue for a more complex and nuanced understanding of project practice, one which does not simply collapse the paradoxically consensual conflictual tensions characterising human relationships and allows us to conceptualise what we actually do when engaging in practice with others.

This understanding of project management practice as emerging from complex responsive processes of relating raised my interest in the simultaneously enabling and constraining tensions underlying this thinking, and prompted me to explore further the paradoxes that I experienced in my project management practice to get a deeper understanding of how these mutually exclusive tensions interrelate and thus produce a new practice.

This thesis thus contributes to project management knowledge in the sense that it proposes another conception of projects, namely as paradoxical, power-driven and emotional processes of human relating which no one can avoid or reliably control. The implication of conceptualising projects in this way may lead practitioners to redirect their focus from the abstract models to how these models are conceptualised in the complex responsive processes of relating going on in practice.

Structure of this Thesis

- This thesis presents **four research projects** describing the narratives and the breakdowns that provoked my respective questions and my reflections on how I made sense of these experiences.
- They are followed by **synoptic summaries** of these same four research projects in which I try to identify the "red thread" in my research arguments and call to mind the key theme informing my research.
- In the subsequent section, I bring together the findings from the four research projects and **critically evaluate** them in the light of the main emergent theme of my thesis (i.e. paradox).
- In the **research method** section, I explain the narrative research method and compare it to more traditional quantitative and qualitative research methods in terms of its validity and generalisability.
- The last part of this thesis explains how I consider my research on project management may **contribute** to project management **practice** and **theory**.

2. Research Projects

Research Project 1:

A Reflexive Autobiography

Introduction

This is the first project in the framework of the Doctor of Management (DMan) Thesis of the University of Hertfordshire. The objective for Project 1 has been defined as follows:

> *Project 1 is a reflective narrative of the influences, experiences and ways of thinking that inform both your work in organisations and how you think about it. This should show how the questions that are beginning to shape your inquiry have emerged in your life, work, education and reading. It should also show how you are beginning to think about and illustrate these in the light of your experience of the program. (8,000 words).*

In the next sections of this project, I intend to provide a reflective account of my past experiences, trying to make meaning out of them, as I perceive them today, and elaborate on the thinking that has influenced me on my way. But it is not simply supposed to be an autobiographical story or a chronology, a simple sequence of my life experiences. Based on a recommendation from Anderson (1990:140), a narrative should emphasise the 'significance these events have for the narrator in relation to a particular theme'. I will thus focus closely on topics that are related to my profession as a project manager - a theme that has dominated my professional life and has particular significance for me. So I would like to use this reflective narrative to ask myself some questions about what makes this topic so relevant to me. The first question is related to why and how I became a project manager in the first place? Was this a simple coincidence, did it just happen to me? Or, did I make some conscious decisions in my life to take this professional route? And what or who influenced me? To my surprise, I have no instant answers to these questions when starting this reflexive narrative.

Over the past 25 years of experience in project management I have often wondered about the way of thinking informing project management, questioning the validity of the underlying assumptions. Therefore, on top of my quest to understand why I became a project manager, this narrative explores some of the experiences responsible for my increased scepticism, highlighting what makes me critically question the commonly adopted perspectives that shape the project management profession.

Ultimately, this reflective analysis of my professional life should yield new insights about how I have become what I am today. This project is a first attempt to make sense of

some of my experiences, but further reflections in the subsequent projects of this DMan programme will undoubtedly be required to sharpen my understanding of what the implications might mean for the future of project management, and for my own practice of it.

How I Became a Project Manager

Influences from Youth

As an adolescent I had no particular plans for a chosen profession. At school, I preferred the more technical domains; somehow I was instinctively drawn to the natural sciences such as mathematics, physics and chemistry. I tended to believe only what I could objectively observe; I liked the straightforward explanations offered by the natural sciences, but I felt less interested in other more social subjects.

Perhaps this lack of enthusiasm for social sciences had to do with my wariness of group affiliation: since my youth I have avoided following the herd, preferring to withdraw whenever I sense peer pressure becoming intense. This may be related to being born into a family of six children in which, as the youngest, I was raised not only by my parents but also by my elder brothers and sisters. Constantly exposed to observation and control, I was always trying to escape the pressure to conform - deliberately doing things differently, such as in my choice of hobbies or schools, just for the sake of demonstrating independence. I thus developed an early tendency to challenge authority, rather than simply following rules or taking for granted the supremacy of a position.

This aversion to authority got me into a lot of troubles at school. For example, when one of my high school maths teachers told me to clean the wooden entrance door, which was covered in chalky mathematical formulas as another teacher had used it as an extension of the blackboard. Although it was common practice for students to clean the blackboard themselves, I firmly refused to clean the entrance door; it seemed unfair to ask a student to clean up the mess left behind by a teacher. This dislike of apparent injustice and a tendency to challenge seemingly unjustified authority, followed me throughout my professional career, fostering a strong preference for autonomy.

Yet from an early age I also enjoyed caring for others and taking over responsibility for their welfare. I often sided up with people who were teased, bullied or treated unfairly. So for example at high school someone wrote an insult on the blackboard in big letters, calling one of our teachers stupid. Understandably upset, the teacher threatened the whole class with punishment unless the culprit revealed its identity immediately. I found her reaction to be unjustified: students from other classes could have committed the offence during the morning break. Besides, punishing the entire class for such an insignificant prank seemed an overreaction. I stood up to challenge her way of dealing with the problem, (at risk of ending up as a scapegoat myself) and was sent to explain myself to the school director. Once all the emotions had settled, the episode was resolved without any punishment for the class. However this incident confirmed my reputation as a rebel.

In retrospect, I wonder in how far this apparent contradiction in my behaviour - namely striving for independence yet at the same time caring for people - might have been an early sign of the qualities that would eventually lead me into project management.

Experiences with Organisational Dynamics

Having graduated with a degree in business informatics, I started my career in the subsidiary of a major foreign bank. As an IT analyst it was natural to collaborate on projects by teaming up with colleagues from various departments of the organisations in order to achieve clearly defined objectives. Under heavy time and budget constraints, we designed, developed, tested and implemented information systems required to achieve cost efficiencies or to create new services for the bank.

I liked working in such environments where we were encouraged to adopt an entrepreneurial approach. This allowed me to take on responsibility while also working autonomously, distant from the constant control of my organisational unit. I also appreciated the diversity in my job, jumping from one project to another and working in different project teams.

Despite enjoying project work, I had no plans to pursue a career as a project manager. This idea would only emerge through further experiences in my career, as described in the following sections.

Experiences in my First Job

Luxembourg's banking industry flourished at that time. With the bank's growing success, the subsidiary I worked in became a launching-pad for an international career within the group: it was not long before strategic positions were taken by expatriates from the parent company. One such appointment was a new chief operating officer (COO) to lead the human resources, banking operations and IT departments: thus my boss, as head of IT, suddenly had a new boss.

I soon noticed that my boss, to whom most of us felt a deep loyalty, was under considerable pressure from his new superior, who gave him detailed instructions in daily status meetings. I remember how in the mornings during our traditional team coffee break, he complained about these daily meetings. At first, we used to tease him about it, but soon stopped doing so, as we noticed that it was painful for him. Within months, the situation had deteriorated: increasingly we felt that we were also being negatively impacted by decisions from above. The teams were constantly reorganised and key people replaced often without any apparent logic. We speculated that these measures could only have one plausible reason: to break up the team so that the new COO could gain control. We were concerned about what would happen to our boss. He was continually discredited by the new COO, who seemed determined to find major shortcomings in the way the IT department was managed - apparently in an effort to increase his own control. He succeeded: my boss was finally replaced by someone from the parent company.

I found this situation hard to bear, breaking up a team that had always worked so well together felt like an injustice. This led me to rebel against the new establishment, directing my antagonism towards the newly assigned manager of my team, unsurprisingly someone coming from the parent company, whose authority I constantly challenged. One day, the situation escalated, when the new boss began pressuring on us heavily with detailed control mechanisms. Obviously, there was a deep mistrust on both sides: we felt bullied and resisted, while in turn he intensified the pressure. As usual in such kind of situations, I could not tolerate the team being so unfairly treated. I openly confronted him in front of everyone, yelling that he should let people get on with their jobs and stop bothering us with his ridiculous control sheets. Having vented my frustration, I left without another word. There were no immediate repercussions resulting from this clash, though clearly it was not really helpful for my further career with the company. But that did not bother me: relieved to have released the emotions

that had built up over the previous 2 years, I didn't think about the consequences that might result.

I now recognise a repeating pattern in my behaviour: faced with situations that seemed irrational and unfair, I saw only my own view and failed to consider any other perspectives, often demonstrating my own irrational behaviours in situations that I could not control.

Finally, I left this organisation to join a software company designing banking solutions, hoping that a smaller company would not waste time and energy on political games. As a consultant, I expected to be more involved with customers and dealing less with internal wrangling. However, this assumption proved wrong.

Experiences in my Second Job

I was one of a few project managers of a new customer service department, helping customers to implement our banking software. We used this opportunity to persuade the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to design new features that our customers had requested. He felt happy that someone had taken over the burden to negotiate this with the two department heads responsible for design and development, who, behind the scenes, were the real leaders of this company.

Although we were acting in good faith to represent the customers' needs, the two department heads appeared to conspire against us. We put a lot of pressure on them to implement further changes in our software, much to the delight of the CEO. To do so, we used some manipulative tricks, such as overstating customer demands and assigning higher customer priorities to key features that we believed would sell well to the customer base. Accusing us of failing to see the whole picture, the two directors responded by blocking most proposed requirements and dictating which functionalities we should design into our product. When they could not find good arguments against our proposed features, they would invent ludicrous cost and time estimates to influence the outcome.

I now recognise that we were engaged in a power game that had little to do with simply deciding on the features of our software solution. The prevalent establishment seemed to defend itself against our rising department, while we were struggling to assert our position in the company. The turf chosen by the two parties was the fight for the

supremacy over the product that we were selling. In retrospect, I also acknowledge that I was as much involved in this game playing as the other side. Both parties assumed we were acting in an ethical way and believed that we understood what was best for the company.

This political game playing worsened over the next two years. The company performed poorly: when finally it was sold to an international group, most of us left soon after.

My Road to Project Management

In the 5 years that I worked for the software company, I found myself confronted with the same patterns of behaviour as previously. Organisational line managers, appeared to be focused on protecting their own interests, rather than striving for the good of the company. I blamed organisational line management as the root cause of the problem, assuming it to be driven by personal interests, focused on career building, striving for power and only concerned with increasing its sphere of influence.

Disillusioned by what I then viewed as counterproductive behaviours, colleagues and managers failing to fight for the right cause, driven instead by personal motivations and aspirations, I felt uncomfortable in the world of organisational politics, perceiving it as impossible to control. I assumed that project management offers a way out of this dilemma, believing that it would provide me this feeling of control, by the various methods and tools it prescribes.

As documented by the dominant project management associations, the American Project Management Institute (PMI 2013) and its European counterpart, the International Project Management Association (IPMA 2010), projects are usually well-defined undertakings. They have a start and an end and well-specified targets (PMI 2013). What I am referring to are mainly ‘organisational change’ projects, which are different from other ‘infrastructure’ and ‘research and development’ project types in that they have a direct impact the organisation itself, often creating resistance to change. (IPMA 2010:44). Typical examples include companies mergers and implementation of information systems. The major difference between projects and business operations lies in their ‘unique’ character, in the sense that projects are new endeavours that the company has never done before - at least not in a way that can be characterised as routine work. In addition, the apparent complexity of an organisational change project derives from its

wide impact on the company, as it involves the whole organisation, or at least major parts of it (ibid:27).

Thus project management is seen as fundamentally different from the daily operations of a company, and requires a different kind of management. Gerold Patzak and Günter Rattay, well-known authorities in the German-speaking project management world, describe project management as "a specific form of appearance of management" (Patzak & Rattay 2004: 29)[1]. They claim it is influenced by a mixture of different schools of thought. They see projects as a whole, a complex system of highly interacting individuals ('systems approach'), assuming that someone, usually the project manager, through experimentation ('empiric approach'), factual analysis and rational decision-making ('decision theory'), is able to design and to act purposefully on the humans forming this system ('behavioural approach'). They further assume that by breaking down the project management exercise to its constitutive parts, we can identify single management functions and attribute to each function some corresponding methods and selective tools, thus providing clear prescriptions for how to approach a project ('functional approach'). These approaches are assumed to be overlapping, complementary and in no way mutually exclusive (ibid:30–34).

From this perspective, I can see many similarities between project and line management. They seem to be based on the same core assumptions (predictability, design agency, systems view, rational decision-making, etc). Project management appeared to be the more rational approach, providing specific methods and tools required to control the inherent complexity of projects. I felt more confident with the seemingly concrete objectives defined in projects, which, in combination with their unique character and challenging constraints, made me feel I was doing something interesting and meaningful. Finally, I assumed that in project constellations there is no time and space for unproductive behaviours resulting from conflicting interests and increased politicisation, a misconception I return to below.

So, my mind made up, I continued my career in project management, acquiring one project management certification after another and eventually becoming a highly certified project director. I was hired as a Senior Project Manager (later becoming a Senior Programme Manager), by a major international player in the financial sector, leading large strategic projects in an international environment.

[1] translation from German:'eine spezifische Erscheinungsform von Management'

Experiencing Project Management

The Promising Beginnings

Starting this new mission felt exciting. This company was much bigger and I was impressed by the project methodologies and structures in place. I was hired as a full-time project manager responsible for implementing strategic projects and believed I was fully responsible for my projects and able to manage them with autonomy and avoid involvement in organisational politics and power games. I felt I had finally arrived; but, of course, it was too good to be true.

My First Doubts about Rationality

Having implemented several projects, my first doubts arose.

First, I soon noticed that I was not as independent from the line organisation as previously expected. It appeared that projects in this company were political arenas, a kind of battlefield for conflicting stakeholder interests. The company invested heavily in their annual project portfolio, so a lot was at stake. This led to constant fights over budgets, human resources and project scope, resulting in conflicts between the different departments and across all hierarchical levels of the company. The situation was made worse by coalition and collusion building, depending on which strategy seemed most appropriate to push through one's own interests. My teams found themselves in the crossfire, trying desperately to make the projects happen.

Thus I discovered that projects were far from being isolated from the rest of the organisation. Conflicting stakeholder interests constantly put my projects at risk. Despite trying to counteract these risks by using different methods and tools proposed by the project management bodies of knowledge (stakeholder analysis, risk management, conflict management, negotiation, to name but a few), the conflicts either remained unresolved, reemerged or simply continued subliminally.

Furthermore, due to the pronounced interest in projects, many line managers intervened actively in my projects, trying to steer them in a direction that was convenient for them. They did this via a kind of shadow project management, by assigning people to the project team who would then report back to them about what happened on the project

and were given concrete instructions on what to do next. Obviously these hidden strategies were not discussed with me and often conflicted with our plans. Under such conditions it was difficult, if not impossible, to control the project.

Once more, I found myself caught up in power games and organisational politics. It seemed I couldn't just escape them!

In addition, other factors in projects severely diminished my feelings of control: people did not always do what they were told to do, or what they claimed to be doing. So for example, I was upset in one situation, when I found out that one of my teams did not follow the plan, although claiming the opposite. When I vehemently challenged the team leader, he responded coolly that we would never achieve our objectives by simply sticking to the project plan. I was perplexed. This seemingly nondescript incident raised a lot of questions: Why do we make such detailed plans, if they do not help people to do their job adequately? If people do not stick to plans anyway, then who are they for: for them, or rather for us leaders, to give us an illusion of control? And how do we still manage to achieve our project objectives, even though people do not conform to the plans?

Another thought occurred to me: Did I not do the same with my bosses? I would often conceal the true project status, knowing that it would only make them nervous and lead them to monitor things more closely. I would try to prevent this by implying that there were no major problems. They should just let us do our job! We know what to do! Now I found myself wondering: What if the people on my projects have the same ideas when reporting to me?

Another experience increasing my scepticism for such rational approaches, occurred during one of the regular project audits that I carried out on other projects. When I asked to see the risk log, the project manager confessed that he did not have one. I was dismayed, as risk management is considered to be one of the key disciplines in project management. Coming out of the meeting I felt obliged to give him a bad evaluation: while the project was in good shape overall, having no risk log was simply unacceptable!

However, when digging through the project documents to finalise my analysis, I found that in their weekly project meetings he had in fact taken the time to discuss all the risks and the corresponding mitigating actions. So, the project manager did perform risk management: he was just not using the standard risk management tools. And,

remarkably, he was involving his core team - an exemplary practice that I rarely saw in other projects that I reviewed. Risk management was often reduced to keeping a few notes in a risk log, just for the sake of being covered in case of an audit. I was reminded of US President Eisenhower's famous quote, which suddenly started to make sense to me:

> *"In preparing for a battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable."*
>
> *Dwight David Eisenhower, American 34th President (1953–1961)*

My Search for Understanding

This experience with conflicting interests between groups of people, and with arbitrarily adopted processes, made me wonder if I could really avoid dealing with personal and group interests and irrational behaviours. How rational are people anyway? Where is this evidence coming from that we can design and plan anything and that people are simply doing what we expect them to do? Project management theories (PMI 2013; IPMA 2010) failed to answer such questions adequately; they simply assumed that best practice processes can cope with any kind of problems.

In my search for responses to these questions, I did some courses unrelated to project management. One of these, which was focused on organisation consulting, was coached by Stefan Kühl, a professor in organisational sociology at the University of Bochum in Germany, who has written several books on consulting interventions from an organisation theory perspective.

Kühl & Moldaschl (2010) emphasise the importance of defining purpose and clarifying inclusion/exclusion rules of membership, as well as hierarchical structures in the organisational context. However, they query wether breaking down the main business objectives into purpose-driven structures and strategies will necessarily lead to efficient organisational machines in which all the component pieces fit together perfectly, like the gears of a smooth-running clockwork mechanism. They believe that the division of labour in organisations leads to local rationalities and inefficiencies that conflict with each other, resulting in informal structures that are largely overlooked by rational theories. Dealing with these inefficiencies and the diverging local rationalities, by trying

to realign the different working groups and focusing on the informal patterns that arise, is one of the key principles of this school of thought (ibid:11–15).

Initially, I found this interesting, as it was confirmed by my experience with departmental conflicts (especially between IT and other departments) resulting from differences in local rationalities. However, it soon occurred to me that this school of thought, by intervening solely at an abstract organisational level, ignores the fact that organisations are actually composed of, and formed, by people. From such a perspective, people seem to be viewed as something that can be easily manipulated one way or another, as suggested by the behaviourists.

Behaviourism is a theory influenced by John. B. Watson, an American psychologist, who saw humans as a kind of 'organic machines', whose behaviour can be purposefully influenced by using external stimuli of sentencing (punishment) and reinforcement (praise) (Watson 1970:49). This view has strongly influenced organisational theories and project management, which therefore privileges processes over people. However, as my narrative demonstrates, people's reactions may not be so easy to control: effusive praise by no means guarantees that people will continue to do what we expect. On the contrary, in my own experience, such simplistic techniques can backfire as people notice the strategy, feel manipulated and react in counter-productive ways.

Seeking further explanations, I did other courses, this time based on more systemic views. Such a perspective appeared to be closer to my experiences, in the sense that it acknowledges the complexity of social systems, seeing all the elements as engaged in non-linear interactions with each other. One course was based on a book from Eckard König, Professor in Educational Sciences at the University of Paderborn in Germany. He perceives systems thinking in the tradition of Gregory Bateson who has developed a more people oriented systems theory ('Personale Systemtheorie'; König & Volmer 2008:38). This views organisations as systems of humans that are autonomous subjects, acting based on their personal interests, sensations and own interpretations of their environment. He contests that humans cannot therefore be simply considered like machines that can be easily controlled, as assumed by behaviourism. He further asserts that a social system, due to the unpredictable interrelationships between people, cannot be changed purposefully. However, he concludes that social systems show recurring behavioural patterns that can be identified and influenced from 'outside' the systems (ibid:19–22).

Although I found this systemic view much more helpful than previous theories I came across, especially with regard to the complexity of the social interactions determining such a system, I always found it difficult to understand the proposed interventions that came along with such theories. How do I detect the recurring patterns of behaviour and how do I influence them? Doesn't this mean that someone from the outside can analyse the social system and find ways to influence it? I found it questionable that external consultants or leaders were supposed to be able to analyse and change the social systems that I belonged to. I believed that we, the people inside the system, had a much better grasp of what was going on and how to pull the right triggers. So, although these theories admit that it is difficult to change a social system, and that a system can only change itself, they nevertheless assumed that purposeful change is achieved by helping the system to help itself.

These theories undoubtedly provided interesting insights, but, I did not perceive any one of them as offering a satisfactory explanation for what I have described in my narrative: some even seemed to contradict my own experience. So my search for explanations could not end here.

A Striking Experience

I reached a point in life where a very striking personal experience made me further question my focus on the rational worldview. This experience related to my mother and how I dealt with her Alzheimer's disease. When she was first diagnosed, I was completely overwhelmed by the situation. My mother began to demonstrate very strange and, from my viewpoint, completely irrational behaviours. Not only did she forget how to do trivial things, but she also seemed to change as a person. She showed signs of deep anxiety, mistrusting everybody and blaming people for doing her harm. My reaction was to try to rationally explain to her that she was wrong, that no one was doing what she insinuated. But this only made her become more upset and angry. After a while I gave up to trying to explain to her what was 'really' happening, simply ignoring her behaviour. Besides, I had so much to organise around her that I was too busy to deal with such irrational accusations. I was focused on processes again, taking a rational approach, just as I had learned to do on my job. But this also meant that I was ignoring her reality, one that, as absurd it might have appeared to me, was very real to her. This was making her retreat more and more, becoming resistant to all kinds of help. It was quite frustrating: I only wanted the best for her, but could not longer reach her.

Suddenly, the situation changed. The day came where I had to move her to a rest home, something she obviously approached with great reluctance. It was a terrible day for me too. Surprisingly, after a few weeks of acclimatisation, I noticed a change in our relationship. I was no longer busy organising her daily life, as those tasks had been taken over by the personnel of the rest home. When I came by to visit my mother, I had the time and the patience to talk to her, to walk her in the park, have a cup of coffee and a cake. Most importantly, I had time to listen to her fears and problems and take them seriously - things I never had time for in the years before, being too busy organising her life. But I now felt how my mother appreciated my visits. She opened up again. I regained her confidence. As her confidant, it was much easier for me to secure her cooperation at times when the disease forced us to take decisions that she could no longer make on her own. These were the best four years I ever had with my mother, in spite of her disease, until the day she passed away.

All these experiences over so many years increased my doubts about the rational paradigm. The human factor seemed to be playing a much more important role in our daily life than I had admitted to myself. Now I started to believe that project management is more about managing people than managing work. I had to accept other people's reality and take more seriously what people think and feel, acknowledging that people have their own interests and that they are defending those interests just as I defend mine.

Further Inquiries

Thus I felt the need for deeper insights into the world of human psychology and completed a master programme in change management based on psychodynamic views. Leopold Vansina, a professor in psychology and a lecturer on the programme, asserts that psychodynamic phenomena become visible in an 'unconscious inner world' and the way that we disclose their effects in the specific context of the situation enables understanding of this inner world (Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert 2008:21). However this world is difficult to reveal: it uses different 'languages' to communicate with the outer world. These languages are expressed through 'images' (e.g. dreams), through 'actions' and 'relations' (ibid:28–49). Understanding these languages may enable change agents to deal with the desires and tensions people are unconsciously expressing in changing situations.

Similarly Amado, a professor of organisational behaviour at HEC (Hautes Etudes Commerciales de Paris) and one of the founders of this programme, refers to a 'psychosocial process taking place in psychosocial systems', stating that both aspects of the process are interacting and thus influencing each other (Amado & Ambrose 2001:6). He sees it as a 'process that involves human perception, cognition and feelings as much as it also involves organisational and social interactional variables' (ibid:3).

Both Vansina and Amado argue in favour of adopting a psychodynamic view of change situations and claim that if these psychic processes are not dealt with appropriately, they will lead to defensive behaviours, at both individual and organisational levels.

Relating back to my previous professional and personal experiences, I find some valid points in such a psychodynamic view, appreciating the fact that they are considering people and identify some valuable insights on how to deal with defensive behaviours. Conversely, I found it very abstract; and that such an approach to change may require people to become experts in psychotherapy to be able to 'put the information from Atlantis to use' (Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert 2008:49). It also seems to me that this perspective unnaturally distinguishes between two levels of intervention - one at the organisational level, using a systems view, and another at the individual level, interpreting psychic behaviours. I wondered how these two levels could be interpreted and treated separately while admitting that both levels mutually influence each other?

Once again, I was dissatisfied with the explanations of the social aspects of my projects. Organisational theory, systems thinking or the psychodynamic approach provided prescriptions that I could not apply, because they were too abstract and/or the prescriptions simply did not work in my environment. Identifying malicious patterns of behaviours and purposefully acting on them seemed to be the common denominator proposed by all these theories, based on a shared understanding that someone from the "outside" would be able to do this. This did not resonate with my own experience from which I concluded that change arises predominantly from within the social environment itself.

During this same Masters programme, I became interested in the theory of complexity and the explanations it could provide for my research. By chance, I came across Ralph Stacey's book on 'Tools and Techniques for Leadership and Management: Meeting the Challenge of Complexity'. Given the title, I expected to find tools for dealing with the complexity of my environment. At first, I was disappointed: the book provided no tools

at all to deal with complexity and definitely no 'how to' prescriptions. On the contrary, it acknowledged the complexity of social interactions, proposing that there are no tools or techniques that enable us to deal with the complex, and thus unpredictable, nature of social interactions in an efficient and purposeful manner. Despite my initial frustration, I persisted with my reading. It proved worthwhile. The book caught me. Critiquing the prevalent systems view, which assumes an external observer who can control the system from the outside, it presented an interesting alternative: 'complex responsive processes of relating' - a theory that focuses instead on the local social interactions between people, as an uncontrollably complex process of relating (Stacey 2012). This instantly resonated with my experiences and offered interesting explanations for the functioning of social environments.

It is this theory that prompted me to apply for this DMan programme, seeking another way of understanding projects and project management that were likely to be more compatible with what I had actually experienced throughout my professional career. In my future projects for this DMan thesis, I will consider the theory of complex responsive processes of relating in search of deeper insights into what might be happening around me in my social environment.

Making Sense of my Experiences

With some hindsight, it appears to me that most of the situations described in this reflexive autobiography show a number of similarities. My behaviour seemed to build on an understanding that favoured a rational worldview and it occurs to me now that my strong belief in my own reality may be a key element in reflecting on my past behaviours, based on the assumption that 'it is the nature of reality itself that determines the patterns we perceive and the meaning we make of our experience' (Stacey 2011:31). I wonder now how I have seen reality, and how has this view affected my actions?

According to the British philosopher and Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell, any discussion on reality is about the 'distinction between "appearance" and "reality'" between what things seem to be and what they are' (2013:10). From these discussions different schools of thought have emerged.

On the one hand, there is the realist's view on reality. The main characteristic of this school of thought relates to its assumption of a 'pre-given reality' (Stacey 2011:31) - pre-given in the sense that there is an objective reality existing independently from any human interpretation. This means that whatever is perceivable through our senses is real. Referring to Descartes and Leibniz, Stacey notes their premise that 'we directly know it because we are born with minds having the capacity for knowing reality' (ibid: 49). Common to this way of thinking is the concept of our mind's inherent ability to understand complex phenomena so as to reveal an objective reality. From this perspective mind may be seen 'as the supreme organiser and discoverer of all reality' (Anderson 1990:60). This represents a rather mechanistic understanding of the world, assuming linear explanations of phenomena that humans are able to perceive and interpret through experimentation in ways allowing them to purposefully design their surroundings according to their needs.

The other extreme in defining reality is the relativist's view. Richard Rorty, a provocative contemporary philosopher, defines relativism as a reality view where 'every belief is as good as every other' - thus reality is 'equivocal' and may have a multiplicity of meanings, depending on the significance that a specific society is attributing to it ('ethnocentric') (Rorty 1991:23). Relativists deny the existence of any pre-given reality whatsoever. To them, any explanation of what is and what happens around us 'only exists in our minds, not out there in reality' Stacey (2011:32). They view mind 'as merely an instrument for understanding or using "real world" experience' and thus perceive it as 'a creator of reality' (Anderson 1990:60). This way of understanding our world provides a more complex explanation of social phenomena and challenges the simplistic view of human capacity for intentional design that is so deeply rooted in the scientific understanding of the realists.

In between these two extremes is situated idealism, which departs from the principle that 'whatever exists, or at any rate, whatever can be known to exist, must be in some sense mental' (Russell 2013:37) and that what we perceive as real are only 'ideas' arising from the 'sense data' processed in our minds. Some idealists do accept the notion of an objective reality, but with the caveat that our human senses are limited - showing a 'representation', not 'things in themselves' (Anderson 1990:60); 'appearances', 'not the actual events' (Russell 2013:16) - so that the absolute reality that exists beyond our perceptions is ultimately unknowable.

Different forms of idealism have emerged. Kant's transcendental idealism implies an innate capacity of our mind, a kind of 'knowing in advance the form that something will take' (Stacey 2003:199), or an 'a priori' knowledge (Russell 2013:74), which appears to reinforce the realist's view. From such a view, idealism appears to assume that an individual is able to approach reality by the rational formulation of a hypothesis and can therefore intentionally design their environment in an individualistic way (Stacey 2003:204).

Other streams of idealism include Hegel's romantic idealism, which challenges the belief that the creation of reality depends on innate capacities of individuals, proposing instead that reality is a social construct based on the interaction of individuals (Stacey 2011:33).

Such an idealist position is also taken by social constructionists. The sociologists Berger and Luckmann, claim that we have to deal 'with the processes by which any body of "knowledge" comes to be socially established as "reality"' (Berger & Luckmann 1997:3). Believing in a collectively built reality, social constructionists question anyone's ability to guide a social environment from the outside; their stance is thus similar to the relativists, by denying any individual capacity to purposefully design, plan and control social systems (Stacey 2011:33).

This brief examination of various reality concepts, although far from exhaustive, demonstrates the wide range of reality interpretations and how these influence behaviours - thus informing my search for a better understanding of my own unconscious belief system and its impact on my behaviour.

I have the impression that I have been greatly influenced by a scientific understanding of reality, believing in the reality of what I sense, and taking for granted that what I perceive and the sense that I am making of it is the absolute truth. Through my education in natural sciences, through my professional experiences in the rational worlds of the banking and IT industries, but also through cultural influences of a Western society moulded by a scientific, rational worldview, I seem to have adopted a view of reality similar to that defended by the realists.

This perspective led me, on the one hand, to develop a strong belief in my own perceived reality that precluded me from questioning my adopted reality or from considering others, which I automatically considered invalid. Such an assumption of an absolute truth, when taken on by the various actors, clearly creates significant potential

for conflict. Thus, our perspective of reality also has important consequences for the way we define the concept of power and how we deal with it.

From a realist's worldview power and politics are considered a hinderance to achieving predefined and planned goals, as inefficiencies destabilising the system. Furthermore, this worldview assumes that leaders have the ability to control their environment and that power somehow 'belongs' to the most powerful people through their assigned authority or due to their control over crucial resources such as information, people or money (Crozier & Friedberg 1977; Morgan 2006; Zaleznik 1971). As such power is often seen to be unidirectional, from the most powerful to the powerless, involving the 'ability to get another person to do something that he or she would not otherwise have done' (Morgan 2006:149–206). From this perspective power games, manipulative behaviours and intrigues are seen as necessary leadership strategies - such as 'managing stakeholder interests' (Morgan 2006:157), analysing and managing the 'uncertainties' of others (Crozier & Friedberg 1977:23–25), or building 'coalitions' and 'collusions' (Zaleznik 1971:52–69, Morgan 2006:162) - to achieve organisational goals, thus confirming the design agency assumptions of systems based on the realist model.

This way of thinking has also informed my own understanding. I saw power as a property of a few privileged people, who purposefully used power to defend their constructed reality, striving to impose it on their environment. In the same manner, I suspected that anyone refusing my logic was driven by ulterior motives to use their power strategies simply to protect their own interests, which were often misaligned with what I believed to be the company's interests (or, should I say, my own interests). Such insurmountable differences in our perceptions of reality may be the reason for many conflicts, sometimes aggravated by bold assumptions about what intrigues and manipulations the other party might be planning. From such a perspective, I saw power as something unproductive leading to an 'increased politicisation' and to 'corporate jungles' (Morgan 2006:205–206) and concluded that projects are difficult and frustrating to realise in such politicised environments.

Not only did this view of reality lead me into numerous conflicts: it also influenced my way of dealing with people and how I perceived my profession as a project manager. It carried with it a strong belief in goal orientation, using linear strategies; in people as independent and autonomous individuals who can analyse, plan and control solutions to any problems; and in communication as a straightforward and undistorted process between two or more persons.

Reflecting on my narrative with these thoughts in mind, I note how my firm belief in my own reality made me strive to avoid examining any 'inefficiencies' stemming from the social aspects of human interactions: I experienced these as just distorting my reality and sought refuge in rational prescriptions on how to achieve my goals more efficiently. I now recognise that people may have different views on reality, which guide their actions and behaviours just as my own reality guides mine. No one simply abandons their reality or denies their own interests just for the sake of an organisation's or a project's objectives. So how could I expect that the COO in my first assignment, or the two department heads in my second job, would readily adopt my version of reality, or that of my group? And was the fact that I defended my reality so ferociously not founded on similar motivations to those of my counterparts - just trying to protect my own interests?

It is equally absurd to expect people to abandon their adopted ways of thinking and working just because someone with higher authority or a best practice approach tells them to do so. So how, in my latest job experience, could I expect others to act according to my instructions simply because I had been given formal authority as the project manager? How could I assume that ignoring their interests and motivations, by insisting on the rigid application of apparently robust professional processes, would ensure that they follow these methods without trying to circumvent and distort them to suit themselves? Even worse, was I not doing the same when given instructions by my own superiors, interpreting these in a way that suited my interests too?

All such thinking and behaving implies a core assumption that we, as humans, are able to know what is true. This can lead to a very limited and one-sided explanation of how we perceive our environment.

Conclusion

Though realism may be a good perspective for explaining natural phenomena, I wonder how easily it can be projected onto social systems. Reflecting on my narratives here, it appears problematic to view social phenomena through the same rational lens. Social relationships in organisations are inevitably complex as they are influenced by diverging aspirations and motivations, emotions and anxieties, cultural influences, group dynamics, and so on. None of these factors are predictable and they elude control by any individual. The realist paradigm, with its rational and linear assumptions appears difficult to apply under such circumstances.

If the rational paradigm cannot explain how projects and organisations actually work in practice, then one may conclude that the underlying realist's ontology and epistemology might be similarly inappropriate to describe such conditions. This makes me reconsider the nature of reality and knowledge that can usefully inform my way of thinking when referring to social phenomena. I am now drawn to experiment with other concepts of reality - taking a more equivocal approach, that borrows from idealist's and relativist's paradigms, challenging the individualistic assumptions of an absolute truth enabling predictable and controllable outcomes. I prefer to draw on other views, seeing the formulation of reality as an inherently social process - in the sense that we are influenced in our construction of reality by our social environment: not just through our direct relationships with others, but also by the historically moulded cultural context in which we find ourselves.

The implications of such a way of thinking may be significant. From a realist's point of view, I tended to believe in our ability to purposefully design and control organisations by using strategies, tools and techniques; I assumed leaders to be privileged by inherited charismatic talents, having visions able to predict future tendencies and developments. In the same way, I also understood organisations as 'corporate jungles' (Morgan 2006:206), seeing power as a kind of unavoidable evil, leading to inefficiencies and unconstructive behaviours through the pursuit of intentional, and often abusive, power strategies to achieve whatever goal the most powerful had in mind.

However, seeing reality as unknowable or even as non-existent, as in other ontologies, may shed new light on our basic assumptions in relation to predictability, use of power, design agency, leadership, social interactions and so on.

It is from such perspectives that I would like to consider my project management work within organisations in the writing of my subsequent DMan projects, to obtain new insights into questions such as:

- What does project success (or failure) mean in the light of acknowledging a more equivocal character of the nature of reality?
- In how far are the linear and abstract project management approaches still justified if we assume a reality paradigm based on multiplicity?
- What are the implications of such a view for me as a project leader? What does it mean for power and control?
- In how far is the social collaboration in the specific framework of a project setting concerned by this change of perspective?

2. Research Projects

Research Project 2

Project Management - a Road to Success?

Introduction

One of the conclusions I drew in my first DMan project was how strongly my way of thinking has been influenced by a realist view, and a belief in the ability to predict outcomes and to analyse, plan and control projects in a deterministic way. I was convinced that we could define objectives at the start of the project, identify the success criteria, apply linear and efficient methods and that these would deliver the expected outcome. This way of thinking was predominant in my work environment and has informed my thinking about project management throughout my career.

Most studies evaluating project success take a similar perspective. The Chaos Manifesto 2012, a worldwide review of IT projects, published for the last 20 years by the renowned Standish Group[2], documents the project failure rates of IT projects based on detailed reviews of project objectives and measurements of project achievements. It concluded that 61% of all IT projects failed in one way or another (Standish Group 2013:2). In this study, a project is considered to be a failure if it was completely aborted, or if it did not achieve one of its key success criteria: usually failing to deliver within the planned timeframe, spending more budget than estimated, not delivering the expected scope, or any combination of these.

This studies argue that the bad results are due to a lack of adoption of the methodical approaches so well documented by the bodies of knowledge of the various project management associations (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009). They hold in common the realist's assumption that project success can be defined, agreed upon by all key stakeholders and that results can be achieved through a rigorous measurement of any deviation from expected targets, be it time, budget or project scope, and as such determine a final success rate.

My experience has shown that the definition and determination of project success is not as easy as suggested by these studies. For example, I was recently doing a project portfolio assessment in a financial institution where I held a workshop with top management to ask them to estimate the level of project failure in their company. This group of 16 leaders came up with a perceived failure rate between 10% and 80%. When

[2] The Standish Group International, Inc. is an independent international research advisory firm, producing an yearly report (Chaos Report) about the success and failure rates of IT projects. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standish_Group. Accessed March 2018.

asking the project managers in one-to-one meetings later about this, they all stated that their projects were all delivered as per plan, i.e. almost a 100% achievement rate. Although such a positive view of their own performance may be understandable, through their own prejudices and need to defend their own interests, it still illustrates significant gaps in the perceptions of project success.

As an experienced project manager, I recognise how I also considered my projects to be successful, at least in the sense that I believed I had delivered what had previously been agreed. I would never have estimated that more than half of my projects were failures, as suggested by the above studies. That said, I also realise that others may have perceived the results of my projects very differently, as outlined in the narrative below.

So how can I explain the equivocal picture of project success, when the theories on project management invite us to believe that success determination is an uncomplicated process, so straight-forward that they are able to put a definitive success label on each project? I also wonder how these various studies could come to very similar conclusions on project failure, especially given that the project stakeholders' perceptions of project success of one and the same project deviated so substantially?

This multiple perception of project success suggests that the realist's view, represented by the above studies on this topic, is not common in our daily project management practice. I question that this stringent view of either success or failure is valid and intend to use this second project of my DMan thesis to investigate how we come to perceive success or failure of such social undertakings and what conclusions may be drawn for the management of projects.

To do this, I will draw on other ontologies that take a more equivocal perspective on reality, which I hope will better reflect what happens in my practice when referring to project success or failure.

Narrative - The Clash

Before the Meeting

I woke up quite late that morning, still very tired. I was not sure if my fatigue was due to the exhausting past year working on a project characterised by a lot of problems, stress and overtime, or because of a sleepless night after a project party to celebrate our project success. We replaced a core IT system in order to achieve efficiency improvements, initiated by the CEO of our company. He was under huge pressure to reduce the operating costs, however he got confronted to heavy resistance of the COO and his business management, fearing a significant cut of their headcount and risking to be outsourced to less cost intensive offshore locations. As a result, the CEO colluded with my boss, the head of IT (CIO), deciding together to implement a new IT solution in order to increase the automation of transaction processing and thus being able to reduce the workforce in business operations. It was not really surprising that this political move was not well perceived by business management and did not really help to improve the historically bad relationships between business and IT departments.

It was the day of the project close down meeting with top management and the key project stakeholders. These meetings are usually held a fortnight after the launch of the IT system, checking if all the project success criteria were met. I was not really nervous about this meeting as I was quite confident that we had done a good job. We had achieved all our success criteria, delivering on time and within budget the previously agreed scope; so what could go wrong? I told myself that everything was under control, nothing to worry about. I got up and prepared myself to leave for the office.

The Meeting

I entered the big meeting room in a good mood and greeted everyone. Nearly all attendees, roughly twenty people from business and IT departments, were present. I was two minutes late, though not the last one to enter the room, as I still wanted to check the latest production problems; just to be sure that no hassles had happened over night in production. But everything seemed fine, so the meeting could start. We were just waiting for the business manager to join us.

I sat besides my boss and two IT department heads, sitting together at one side of a large table, facing the rest of the meeting attendees. I was talking to one of my colleagues, when my boss whispered in my ear: “Were there any issues in production over night?“. Knowing my boss, I expected such a question and was eager to tell him that no major issues were to be reported, only some smaller problems. Though, I wondered why he was asking the question now, as I was sure that he had checked this himself before coming to this meeting. My boss is the best informed guy in this company and he must have been aware of the production status. But I felt he was nervous, squinting secretly at the other meeting attendees, sitting on the other side of the table, as if he were trying to interpret their body language. So I leaned over to him: ”Why are you asking? Is something wrong?“. He was still looking into the round, murmuring back:”I don’t know … they are so quiet!”. I glanced around the table, and he was right. Usually there is a lot of talking going on before meetings start, lots of joke making and laughter. This time the business colleagues seemed quite busy, looking into their documents and not talking much. My boss’s nervousness started to catch me too.

Then the COO entered the room. He is the business counterpart of my boss, responsible for all business operations. As the project customer, it was his meeting. He had to decide at the end if the project was considered good enough. He was late, a fact that my boss hated, as he was always on time and did not like anyone making him wait. Both greeted each other silently, nodding their heads, and the business manager sat down at the table head and started to take over his role as a chairman of the meeting.

The Clash

The floor was quickly passed over to me in order to present the latest project status and the key performance indicators. I was well prepared to provide evidence of our success: more than 5.000 system requirements had been implemented, 45.000 test cases had been validated, 2.500 software bugs identified during testing out of which 98% had been fixed. All scope delivered as per the signed requirement documents and change requests of more than 1.000 person days of work effort delivered on top of this scope. The budget, although slightly overrun (3%), was still within the contingency budget and could be explained by the high number of change requests ordered by the business. And, we delivered on time! After my presentation, I felt confident again that these results must be accepted as a success. The figures simply could not lie. I looked expectantly round the room, waiting for applause and praise. But none came. For a short while silence filled the

room. Most business people were pretending to be busy studying the powerpoint slides, some were simulating answering important mails on their blackberries, all avoided to looking up. I glanced over to my boss. He seemed worried, despite the impressive figures I just presented.

The COO invited his managers to provide their views, after working for two weeks with the new IT system. One of the business department heads stated hesitantly that overall the implementation of the IT system was fine, the system had been installed on time; but his people found the system a bit complicated to use. Another department head added that the new IT solution was not well documented and the training offered was insufficient for his people to work efficiently with it. Finally, another business manager raised his voice somewhat aggressively, stating that it was not only a matter of documentation and training, rather the system was simply too complex to be efficiently used. He strengthened his argument by referring to the exception queues (transactions which cannot be processed automatically are routed into queues waiting for manual exception handling), which were overloaded with thousands of transactions waiting for manual processing. He claimed that his people would not be able to fix all these problems manually within the next months, and that we had to expect a huge backlog. These problems had never been mentioned to me before, at least not as being showstoppers for the project. And now they hesitantly raised these trivial problems, as if they were major issues, in this official meeting. How dare they?

I was perplexed. All these problems were not related to the new IT system itself, but rather related to a lack of interest that the business departments had demonstrated during the project. The issue with the exception queues had been known since the beginning of the tests of the new system and were related to data quality problems in the current production systems, a problem which could only be fixed by business operations. It had been raised to the business colleagues several times since then. Therefore, I felt this criticism to be unfair and I noticed how my temper rose. My boss glanced over to me. I understood his “keep cool” gesture, but I couldn’t resist to jumping in. I had to protect my project and my team. I stated quite aggressively that the project was not responsible for their mess with production data, and that we made them aware during the project that the data needed to be cleaned before the launch. I accused them of doing nothing to solve the problem in production, despite us raising this problem several times. I continued explaining that we had delivered all the requirements signed off by the business, and that I could not accept that my project was blamed for their

problems. Furthermore I praised the team for having done much overtime to make this project happen, and that it is unfair to present the project in such a way. They should instead recognise what we had delivered.

The mutual blaming went on for some more minutes until my boss touched my arm to make me cease, trying to calm things down. He admitted that technical solutions are required and that we should now work all together to address the outstanding problems. He emphasised the need for our company to make the system achieve its efficiency targets. This move made the COO step into the discussion, who until that moment had not intervened at all. He doubted that the planned benefits and the efficiency targets would still be realistic. He questioned how we could deliver an IT system that was causing more workload to his people than they previously had: “I can’t understand why we invested so much money without achieving any value for the business; how will I now realise the expected cost efficiencies?”. When he said these words, it sounded like a threat, which he directly addressed to my boss, and pointed to the need for further discussion of this topic in the board meeting.

I could see that my boss was upset by this intervention. However, he stayed calm and in his very diplomatic way, suggested the creation of a task force of business and IT people to do everything possible to make this project become a success. Although seemingly accepted by all meeting attendees, I felt this proposal just being a pretext for everyone to close this unpleasant meeting as soon as possible. The problem was far from solved.

The meeting got closed with the usual notes of thanks to the project team.

How Could this Happen?

I was upset. I did not really understand what had just happened. How could my project be considered a failure by the business, although for the project team and myself it was a proven success? We did what was expected from us. Admittedly, the definition of the success criteria was a painful exercise, but the business still signed them off. How could such an evident success be seen as a failure at the same time?

What went wrong? I applied all the methodologies as prescribed by the professional bodies of knowledge of project management (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009). I managed the change process by trying to motivate the business people to support the project, despite the negative consequences that they were expecting from the project

results. I organised workshops to understand their needs, involving them in the design of the new system, communicating and explaining the project intentions, trying to build coalitions with them, actively managing stakeholders, trying to resolve conflicts between business and IT people and so forth. I did all this to make the change appear less frightening to them, hoping to get their commitment to support the project. But we still faced disinterest, defensive and protective reactions from the business people, refusing to engage into the project, sitting tight and waiting for the project to deliver, only to reject later on the end solution. Was it just a miscommunication, a misunderstanding, a lack of alignment of key stakeholders? Did we not apply the methods and tools correctly? Or did we simply miss something during the project?

At that time, I could not provide an answer to these questions. My interest in this research project is to find an explanation what success means if rational success criteria are no more tenable. I will start my research by investigating the roots of the discipline of project management, why we use this method and why it is needed. In a second step I will then draw on the underlying assumptions that inform the theories of project management and the determination of project success.

Project Management - A Rational Approach

The Roots of Project Management

Project practices started to become institutionalised in the middle of the last century as an attempt to plan and manage successfully large and complex endeavours of our era. Garel (2013), a professor of innovation management researching the history of project management, considers the first historical steps into project management as the invention of design tools to anticipate the future outcome of an endeavour, such as the blueprints in the disciplines of architecture and engineering (ibid:663). For Garel, it was the 'anticipation of the future object' which drove the transition from 'intention to design' to the 'rationalised preparation of the design stage' (ibid:665). This focus on design agency and predictability, in form of clear objectives to be achieved through detailed planning, is preserved as a key principle in contemporary project management approaches. It leads to the standardisation of rational project management tools and methods, also referred to as the '"hard" systems management' (Winter et al. 2006:640). This approach has become the dominant strand in project management, mainly due to

the influence of the emerging professional project management associations (Garel 2013:667–668), namely the Project Management Institute (PMI 2013) in the United States and its counterpart in Europe, the International Project Management Association (IPMA 2009), together listing nearly one million certified project and programme managers in over 200 countries.

Project Management - Controlling Uncertainties

The attempt to deal with the uncertainties of complex endeavours explains why project management is believed to be required in the first place. Most definitions of project management refer to a common characteristic of projects, namely the 'uniqueness' or 'novelty' of project endeavours (PMI 2013:3, IPMA 2010:27, Garel 2013:663, Kerzner 2009:56, Turner 2009:2, Patzak & Rattay 2004:18). Projects are considered to be non-routine and temporary undertakings, not part of the daily operational routine of organisations, confronting the organisation with problems and situations that they are not used to; as for example, a merger between two companies or the implementation of new IT solutions to make the routine operations of a company run more efficiently. Such undertakings may require the usage of unavailable knowledge, unknown technologies and methods or lead to unexpected and unfamiliar changes within the company itself and as such can be considered as highly uncertain.

A further reason for using project management techniques commonly mentioned by the professional project management bodies (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince 2 2009, Garel 2013, Kerzner 2009, Patzak & Rattay 2004) is related to the fact that such unique endeavours often require various parts of an organisation to work together in a way they are not used to in their daily, routine operational work: people from different departments of the organisation, with different working cultures and group interest, need to be coordinated and aligned in order to achieve the predefined project outcomes.

It is commonly assumed that, both, the uniqueness of the endeavour and the need for coordination, combined with the fact that project undertakings are by definition time-constrained, implies the need for the 'implementation of specific management techniques' in form of project management (Turner 2009: 5) in order to get these uncertainties under control.

Projects as Cybernetic Systems

The coordination of different teams is also one of the main reasons why Patzak & Rattay (2004:33), Garel (2013:665) and specifically Kerzner (2009:38), in his renowned project management book 'Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling, and Controlling' (2009) defines project management "as applied systems management": They see one of the main objectives of project management as the integration of the different subsystems, whose appearances result from the division of labour in organisations. They believe that the methods and tools, promoted in the contemporary project management bodies of knowledge (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009), are the "common language" required to form these subsystems to a harmonious and efficient whole, in order to achieve preset project goals that the different subsystems could not reach on their own.

Ralph Stacey, in his critical analysis of systems thinking (Stacey 2011), uses the term "cybernetic systems" (ibid:71) to denote such a scientific understanding of organisations. He describes them to be "goal-seeking" and closed control systems, permanently adjusted from outside the system through "negative feedback" mechanisms, where the various regulations are independent from each other, having no sense of history and where "success is a state of stability, consistency and harmony" (ibid).

Seeing projects as cybernetic systems is a direct result of this realist way of thinking that we have adopted since the scientific revolution of the last century. For Cooke-Davies, a scholar in project management theories, project management approaches are primarily based on a mechanistic world view derived "from Cartesian philosophy, a Newtonian understanding of the nature of reality, and an Enlightenment epistemology" which claim that our world is ultimately understandable through empirical research (2007:51). From such a view, projects may be perceived as if they were objects which can be split into manageable parts in order to understand the general rules governing their functioning. Assembling those parts is seen to be a straight-forward and linear process and success is achieved when the parts have been assembled correctly. The main task of project management is then to secure an efficient and timely assembly.

It is this systemic understanding, applied to activities of human organisation, which has influenced the project management theory throughout its development.

Project Success - a Simplified Concept

In the same way that projects are reified as objects, project success and failure are often objectified in form of unequivocal success criteria, seemingly free from any human interpretation, allowing the correct determination of project success, and thus providing a means to differentiate project success from project failure. This is also the view taken on by the study on project success and failure that I mentioned earlier in this project (Standish Group 2013).

Project Success Criteria - The Iron Triangle

Such a simplified understanding of project success and failure is largely confirmed in many studies of project management scholars, such as Shenhar (1997, 2001), Atkinson (1999), Markus (2004), Jugdev & Müller (2005), Winter et al. (2006) and Hodgson & Cicmil (2013), Söderlund & Lenfle (2013), who deduced from their studies in the project management field that projects are mainly measured against standard success criteria, promoted by the traditional project management theories (IPMA 2010, PMI 2013, Prince2 2009) and often referred to as the "iron triangle" (Atkinson 1999:341). From such a view project success means delivering on time and within budget a previously agreed scope, treating projects as an "operational" problem (Jugdev & Müller 2005:20), focusing solely on the project lifecycle as a basis to measure success (Ward 2007: 2) and ignoring the "unintended consequences" that projects may have on organisations (Markus 2004:5). Emphasis is put on "doing something right" and measuring if it has been done correctly (Atkinson 1999: 339) or on "getting things done" and "getting it out of the door" (Jugdev & Müller 2005:23). From a traditional project management view, the iron triangle is a metaphor for stable success criteria, which elements, i.e. time, budget and scope, should be held in a constant equilibrium allowing to determine wether a project has been successful or not, promoting efficiency thinking (Atkinson 1999:339) and a "functional" and "instrumental" view (Hodgson & Cicmil 2013:145) of project management. In other words, we tend to emphasis project management success over project success (Söderlund & Lenfle 2013:655).

This is also what happened in my project. I started by defining a seemingly stable set of success criteria. However defining project success criteria, is far from being a trivial and straight-forward process, as I experienced when trying to align all the stakeholders on a commonly agreed scope. Despite putting significant emphasis on the process of scope definition, we had difficulties to nail down a scope acceptable to all key stakeholders.

But instead of openly discussing the problems, I urged them to move on, driven by my own interests to deliver an IT system at a specific date within a clearly framed budget. These were my personal targets, influenced by many factors such as the expectations of my boss, the CIO, eager to position his IT department by helping the CEO to implement his efficiency strategy; by my team attempting to design a state-of-the-art IT system; by the resistances of the business to be the victims of an over-engineered IT solution; by my own career aspirations, and by many more factors. As the project manager, I felt responsible for somehow dealing with these various expectations and for finding a compromise. I needed clear objectives that we could achieve, goals acceptable by all parties, but also stable enough so that there was a clear target to be hit. I considered the iron triangle approach as the magic tool helping me out of my dilemma to satisfy seemingly controversial expectations of the various project stakeholders.

This understanding of project success criteria may also explain what made me react so harshly in the project close down meeting when faced with a lack of acceptance of what we delivered. Having had such difficulties to define targets, which, once seemingly agreed upon, we then rigidly followed throughout the project, I was not able during the close down meeting to handle criticism of what we achieved. From my perspective, I did my best to make this project become a success, despite the problems we faced in dealing with various expectations and, despite the resistance and the lack of support that we experienced throughout the project. At that moment, I just found their criticism unfair.

Project Success - a Rather Simplistic Formulae

It occurs to me now that my attempt to reduce the project objectives to static targets which we would be able to achieve, was a desperate attempt to deal with the complexities we were encountering. Some of the project management scholars cited above, see these difficulties to define project success as the main reason why rather simplistic formulae are often adopted within projects. As a result, projects are often measured against tangible success criteria like budget, schedule and level of performance, ignoring the less tangible criteria, as for example, generating customer satisfaction or value for the organisation (Shenhar et al. 1997:98). Hirschhorn (1990:67) refers to the ‘organisational ritual’ to denote this common phenomenon in Information systems (IS) projects where the correct usage of tools and methodologies is given preference to content and value, thus avoiding real communication and seeking more satisfying solutions. Ironically, it is just the uncontrollable nature of these higher level business targets that we were expected to achieve, which made us informally, and

unconsciously, revert back to a minimal achievable denominator for defining the success criteria. In IS projects, these simplistic formulae often result in merely focusing on success criteria reduced to the technical installation of an IT system, which then becomes an end in itself.

This was very similar to what I experienced in my project where the timely installation of an IT system was given preference to meaningful change, despite obvious signals of resistance from the customers of our project. In face of disinterest demonstrated by the business people, we simply moved on, focusing on a technical solution instead. And even in the project close down meeting, where the resistance culminated in open disagreement, we still moved on "fixing" the outstanding technical issues (i.e. the exception handling queues), still ignoring the real problems underlying the resistances.

As this phenomenon is widely spread in projects, many project management and organisational development scholars have taken up this problem, trying to find explanations and resolve it.

Common Prescriptions to Overcome the Fallacies of the Rational Approach

Taking a Broader View on Success Criteria

To overcome the difficulties to define project success criteria, some project management scholars prescribe taking a broader view on project success, giving up the limited criteria of the iron triangle; i.e. a timely delivery of a pre-defined scope within a budget limit. Instead they advocate projects take a more 'strategic position' (Jugdev & Müller 2005:21) or see projects as 'strategic weapons' (Shenhar et al. 2001:703) securing the link to business strategy (Winter et al. 2006:644). Some point to the need for changing the focus from pure efficiency aimed at improving business results (Shenhar et al. 2001:703) or 'value creation' for the project customers and thus 'managing exogenous factors, as well as the more traditional "execution-focused" endogenous ones' (Winter et al. 2006:644). Others call for the need for targeting sustainable "business benefits" (Ward 2007:4, Atkinson 1999:340).

Although, I agree that the efficiency criteria often adhered to in projects are over-simplifications in face of challenging targets in difficult environments, I am not convinced that just defining broader project targets would be sufficient to overcome the

difficulties that we are facing in projects. In my narrative above, there were actually broader business targets defined, trying to achieve cost efficiencies on the business side and thus there was a clear strategic benefit. So how come that we still did not achieve those broader targets?

To me this striving for effectiveness appears to be relying on the same way of thinking as the efficiency one, believing in our ability to align many stakeholders in a way that makes it possible to achieve this predefined effectiveness targets. It still assumes predictability of outcomes achievable through the usage of linear approaches based on a simple "if…then" relationship of cause and effect, and thus ignores seemingly irrational motivations or power games prevailing in human interactions. Simply aiming for higher level targets in such a conflicting context, as just a wider iron triangle, does not address the differences in perceptions and motives of the various stakeholders.

Dealing with the Human Factor

These unintended effects of the projects on the organisation are often neglected in technology driven change projects. Reason enough why some scholars in the change management field have taken up these shortcomings of the "hard system management' (Winter et al. 2006:640) and call for the need to deal with the human factor.

They claim that project failure is not necessarily the result of a lack of adoption of rational project management methods, but that the problem in achieving project success stems mainly from "dysfunctional human reactions" (Amado 2001:9), often referred to as resistances to change, which they claim need to be dealt with if project failure is to be avoided. Many change management scholars have identified strategies to deal with these individual and social defence mechanisms and have tried to address the 'unintended consequences' (Markus 2004:5) which projects may have on the organisation. For example, Kotter (1996) promotes an eight-step approach focusing on people involvement by recommending defining a clear change vision and strategy, explaining the necessity and utility of change to stakeholders, guiding coalitions, removing barriers and enable people to overcome any resistance to change, targeting quick wins, sustaining the dynamic of the change and institutionalising it.

Other scholars in change management adopt psychodynamic approaches for dealing with individual or group defence mechanisms, focusing on the anxieties that change may trigger in people, and calling for provision of environments allowing people to

accommodate to painful change experiences and thus learn to deal with psychodynamic processes. (Diamond 1996, Amado 2001, Vansina & Vansina 2008).

Another problem when referring to project stakeholders is the abusive usage of politics and power games, considered as a hinderance when it comes to achieve project success, as something unproductive leading to an 'increased politicisation' and to 'corporate jungles' (Morgan 2006:206). Some scholars in this field recommend implementing strategies such as 'managing stakeholder interests' (Morgan 2006:157) analysing and managing the 'uncertainties' of others (Crozier & Friedberg 1977:23–25), or building strategic 'coalitions' and 'collusions' (Zaleznik 1971:59, Morgan 2006:162) to successfully achieve project objectives.

What all those theories seem to have in common, is that they are based on John B. Watson's (1970) concept of behaviourism, a concept already mentioned in my first DMan project. This theory emphasises our capability to extrinsically motivate people by using more or less manipulative strategies to make changes digestible to the victims of change and claiming to be able to overcome human irrationalities, thus preventing failure from outside the human system. I was educated in the same tradition, and as documented in my narrative, I used such manipulative strategies in my project too. I was assuming that I could manage the different interests of the stakeholders, that I would be able to persuade business people to commit to the project just by involving them, or that I could solve the conflicts resulting from these diverging interests, and so forth. But I had to learn that this was a challenging, if not impossible, endeavour. I reacted by focusing on what appeared to be the "real work", avoiding the conflicts and other apparently irrational behaviours, just blindly moving on with my project, repressing the fears that this way of proceeding may lead to severe problems later on.

It is striking how these theories seem to consider power games and defence mechanisms as dysfunctional human behaviours, which are to be avoided at any costs and not as natural reactions common to all human beings. At the same time the disciples of these theories appear to fall back on linear strategies to achieve predicted outcomes, by attempting to make people accept change and commit to the project objectives, using power games and manipulative techniques to deal with conflicting interests and anxieties. Thus, they also adopt a similar way of thinking as the one they are reproaching to the project management approaches, and thus somehow ignore the complexities of everyday life.

Dealing with Project Complexity

Some scholars challenge this rather simplistic view and refer to the complexity theories to get a more balanced understanding of projects. Several studies in this field such as Williams (2002), Pollack & Remington (2007), Geraldi (2008), Cicmil et al. (2009), Daw (2011), Loch & Paynes (2011), Remington & Zolin (2011) or Cooke-Davies et al. (2011) point to several key drivers of project complexity, which they believe to increase significantly the complexity of project undertakings.

Some of them conclude that one of the main factors driving project complexity is related to the uncertainty of not knowing what to do, due to the "wickedness" of the problem to be solved (Daw 2011:153) or due to the "uncertainty of initial conditions" and the resulting lack of clarity of requirements (Carver & Maylor 2011:61), or due to "unclear or unshared goals or goal-paths" ("directional complexity" (Remington & Pollack 2007:34)), or, as phrased by Cicmil et al. (2009:42–43), due to the "ambiguity and equivocality of goals".

Another key driver of complexity in projects is seen by many scholars to be related to the uncertainty of not knowing how to implement the project due to the uniqueness of the project scope and thus not having the technical or methodical expertise to handle these complexities ("technical complexity" (Pollack and Remington 2007:7); "technological novelty" (Remington & Zolin 2011:122); (Carver & Maylor 2011:61); "complexity of faith" or the "uncertainty of doing something new" (Geraldi 2008:5–6)).

Furthermore, structural elements of projects are most often mentioned as key driver in the studies cited above. What is meant here are mainly factors related to project size and the number of interrelated elements, such as the number of system components, the number of tasks to be managed, or the number of stakeholders that need to be aligned ((Carver & Maylor 2011:61); (Williams 2002:52); "structural complexity" (Pollack & Remington 2007:7); "technical complexity" and "actor complexity" (Lock & Paynes 2011:41)).

It is further assumed that the dynamics of the project environment, often in relation to the duration of the project, is adding to the level of project complexity ("unexpected environmental changes" (Remington & Zolin 2011:122); "dynamic dimension" (Carver & Maylor 2011:61); "temporal complexity" (Pollack & Remington, 2007:8); "external complexity" (Loch & Paynes, 2011:41)).

To overcome these complexities, it is proposed to take a situational approach by choosing the project roles, structures and methods in accordance to the type and level of complexity of the specific project ((Carver & Maylor 2011:65–69); (Pollack & Remington 2007:85–86, 123–124, 133)); to split up projects in manageable parts to overcome structural complexity, related to project size and number of interrelated elements (Pollack & Remington 2007:113); to use problem structuring and solving techniques (Pollack & Remington 2007:141, 179, 196), tools helping to align stakeholders interests (Cooke-Davies et al. 2011:102) or use more iterative and incremental approaches ((“interpretive approach” (Pollack & Remington 2007:55); “protoyping” strategies (Markus 2004: 14); “trial and error” methods (Takeuchi & Nonaka 1986:3)), in order to deal with the ambiguity of project scope. Highly dynamic projects environments are proposed to be countered with flexible and incremental definitions of success criteria and pro-active risk management approaches (Pollack & Remington, 2007:147).

Other scholars emphasise the need to implement self-organising and diversified teams believing the resulting ‘cross-fertilisation’ to lead to more creative and widely accepted results (Takeuchi & Nonaka 1986: 4), or a shift in the leadership approach from a control paradigm to a more participative leadership style, where the project leader is supposed to be a facilitator rather than a manager, focusing on “enabling” people (Plowman & Duchon, 2007) and fostering creative conditions (Marion & Uhl-Bien 2007: 148).

What strikes me in these studies is that project complexity is perceived to be mainly driven by rational factors such as ambiguity of project objectives, technical novelty, maturity of processes, project size and the number of interrelated elements, or due to project external uncertainties. The proposed techniques to overcome these problems still appear as prescriptive, and thus linear, approaches when it comes to deal with these complexities.

An increasing minority of project management scholars see socio-political aspects as being the key drivers of project complexity (“actor complexity” (Geraldi 2008:5–6), “complex multi-agent interfaces” (Cicmil et al. 2009:42–43), “interaction of people” (Cooke-Davies et al. 2011:ix)). According to Cooke-Davies et al. (2011) it is in this interaction of physical teams that unpredictable behaviour, and thus complexity, emerges. He is referencing a NASA investigation done by Pellerin (2009:11) stating that

> *'[…] between 80% and 95% of project failures are a result of either human or miscommunication (which is still human) issues. People can clearly be seen as the critical component in the difference between "complicated" and "complex" projects',*
>
> *Cooke-Davies et al. 2011:ix*

The difference between "complicated" and "complex" here is to be seen in the non-linearity of causes and effects, or expressed colloquially: "if you don't understand what will happen when you kick it—that's complex" (ibid:2). Those scholars see the interwoven human interactions being responsible for the difficulties to retrace causalities and thus conclude that the "interaction with living sentient beings, rather than the technical issues of projects" to be the reason for the complexity of human undertakings (ibid).

This view also resonates with the experience I made in my project. Redesigning a core IT system to increase the efficiency of business operations is far from being trivial, and thus, from a technical perspective, may be considered a complicated undertaking. Over many years, useful and proven tools have been designed to make the implementation of such technical systems a straight-forward process. However projects are done by people and cannot just be considered as technical challenges, simply ignoring the intricacies resulting from social activity. Reducing success to some rigid criteria, at the start of the project is a highly simplified approach, a generalisation, not doing justice to the specific needs of the various people involved or impacted by the project results.

In the next sections of this project, I would like draw on other ways of thinking, considering the complexity of the socio-political context of projects.

An Alternative Way of Thinking

Ways of Thinking Informing Contemporary Project Management Approaches

From the history of project management and its more recent developments, I conclude that the widely spread traditional project management thinking is mainly based on a realist word view and it's basic assumptions such as objectivity, predictability and the linearity of cause and effect. From this perspective projects may be seen in the same way as Mowles (2015a) is describing how some people see organisations, namely in the tradition of Descartes and Newton, as if they were 'mechanical universes discoverable from universal laws' and relying on 'rational, calculating, objectifying methods of scientific enquiry' (Ibid:20). Such an understanding of our world implies also an "either …or" thinking when referring to project success and project failure, seeing both as diametrically opposed states of a project which can never happen at the same time: a project is either a success or a failure, but it can never be both simultaneously. This was also my understanding in the project close down meeting, seeing my project as a proven success, as all success criteria were apparently met; I was not able to comprehend how someone else could see the same project as a failure.

A further influence on the dominant project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010) can be traced back to Kant's transcendental idealism which I already presented in my first project. He was making a distinction between reality and 'appearances' of reality (Anderson, 1990:60) and thus taking on a dualistic view of nature. According to Stacey, Kant developed a way of thinking allowing the co-existence of "determination and freedom", the former being located in natural systems where the final goal is already part of the system, as a "mature form of itself" (Stacey et al. 2000:57) and the later in human beings, which as autonomous individuals are free to choose their actions (ibid: 28–29).

It is this dualistic interpretation of nature, by simply applying it to human systems, that has found its way into the contemporary management sciences, and also into project management. These theories are seeing projects as systems (Garel, 2013, Kerzner, 2009, Patzak & Rattay, 2004), as objectified wholes, already having embedded finalised conceptions of themselves (Stacey 2011:51, Griffin 2002:5). But these goals may be simultaneously influenced from outside, by autonomous individuals, much like a

scientist intervening into a natural system, and steering the system by defining objectives, rules and procedures 'according to which such systems are to unfold their future' (Griffin 2002:206).

However, when applying this dualistic thinking to social systems, Stacey believes that we are intermingling two different causalities, seeing on the one hand the independent individuals, able to take their own decisions, and thus being subject to a 'rational causality', and on the other hand the object, as a whole, constituted by 'the self-organising interactions of the parts', 'unfolding what is already enfolded into it', and thus subject to a 'formative causality' (Stacey 2011:52). Shaw, Griffin and Stacey believe that by applying this "both…and" perspective to social systems, we are 'losing the tension between the individual and the group he belongs to' (Griffin 2002:8–10), and thus we are "resolving contradictions and ignoring conflicts" (Stacey et al. 2000:29).

Such a systemic view on projects appears to be an abstraction of what actually happens on the project field, giving prominence to an individual and rational understanding of social phenomena, where single persons have the ability to prescribe and manage solutions or resolve conflicts in a purposeful way. I wonder how the daily activity in our project life can be understood in a different way, emphasising the social aspects of this project activity.

Hegel's Dialectic Logic

For this purpose I am going to draw on theories influenced by Hegel and his 'anti-foundational' understanding of reality (Mowles 2015a:30), not seeing it as a given or as an individually designed appearance, but rather as a social construct emerging from a 'dialectical logic' through intersubjective conflicts (Stacey, 2011:299–300).

Hegel challenges the dualistic understanding, assuming a 'both…and' structure which is resolving contradictions; his dialectic logic preserves conflict instead of ruling it out or resolving it (Mowles 2015a:21), and results in paradoxical processes where two 'mutually exclusive, self-referencing' forces simultaneously influence each other to produce something unexpected and uncontrollable and thus emphasises the 'unity in difference' (ibid:13).

For Hegel knowledge is the result of a mental process of interacting individuals and is emphasising the 'intersubjective unity of mutually recognising agents', seeing humans as

'social practitioners' (Stacey 2011:298–300). He is thus understanding human development as an essentially social process, questioning the ability of individuals to step outside these social practices and thus has a fundamentally different comprehension of processes than Kant assumes in his systemic thinking, giving precedence to the individual and resolution of contradictions (ibid).

In the following sections, I will draw on theories building on this social understanding of human development, acknowledging the paradoxical and thus complex character of socially constructed phenomena, such as the success and failure of projects.

Projects as Social Processes

Norbert Elias, a German sociologist of Jewish descent, draws on Hegel's dialectic logic to develop his theory of civilising processes, and has become famous for situating the development of everyday practice within a larger sociological context. Elias (1997:357), building on Hegel, does not see the societal development in the form of a system of humans, as a pre-conceived whole, influenceable from the outside, but rather in form of a "long-term process" (ibid).

Process Thinking

Process thinking is concerned to determine 'how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time' and assumes change to be a continuous social process (Langley, et al. 2013:1). In this sense, Elias understands large social structures to develop from many dialectical interactions between individuals, as a continuous historical process, claiming that the interplay of many "voluntary actions" leads to the emergence of something that no one individual could have planned (Elias, 1997:356–360). He embraced the contradiction between the individual and the social involved in societal development, not claiming one to be dominant over the other, but rather assuming that "the individual and the group are the singular and the plural of the same phenomenon, namely, human relating" (Griffin, 2002:10 (referencing Elias, 1989 'The Symbol Theory')).

From such a process view, my reaction to blindly follow the project management methods to the detriment of creating something valued, eventually becomes

understandable in a more sensible way. I was educated and trained in a way to believe that we are able to manage and control a project and that project success can be objectively defined and measured. I was part of a 'thought collective' (Fleck, 1979:39), a community of people providing 'the special "carrier" of the historical development of any field of thought, as well as for the given stock of knowledge and level of culture' and thus I was formed by this community and at the same time I was forming it. Which means that my realist perception was not present at birth, or planned in any way, but has been co-created in many social interactions with others, making me challenge any deviation of the reality of the thought collective I belong to, to be either wrong or being the product of other people's unfair intentions. This way of thinking caught up with me in the specific moment of the clash in the project close down meeting, believing in the evidence of my figures, as objectified project success criteria, interpreting any other success definitions as impossible.

In the meantime, my experience has developed, in continuous exchanges with others, for example when doing a Master programme or this Doctoral programme in social sciences, making me challenge the strong belief in my reality and question the rational and linear view I so much took for granted. However, this development was never planned for, but has rather emerged from the social practice, be it of private or professional nature, in a way I would never have expected myself, as a product of a continuous and indomitable social process.

My understanding of social phenomena is thus shifting gradually from a systems view to a process view, which leads me to question essential differences between the two ways of thinking.

Process vs Systems Thinking

Process thinking delimits itself from system thinking in the first place by its ontological foundations. Stacey (2011:301) claims, in his critical analysis of systems thinking, that its disciples assume the existence of harmonious and objective wholes, as real entities, for example an organisation or a project, having a finalised notion of themselves. From this perspective, change means 'a succession of movements of a recognisable entity over time'. Such an understanding is demonstrated by Kurt Lewin's three-phases model of change: known as one of the modern pioneers of social, organisational, and applied psychology, he concludes that change is achieved, in a first phase, by unfreezing a

system so that, in a second phase it can be reshaped by someone external to the system and once the target state is achieved the system is refrozen again (Burnes 2004:985–986).

In contrast, for Elias (1997), social life is far from being stable and harmonious, rather societies are considered to be in a constant flux of change and are never achieving a state of completeness. In the same way, entities, such as organisations, are 'no more than temporary instantiations of ongoing processes, continually in a state of becoming', seeing the world as a sequence of incidents forming our experience rather than things moving from one state to another (Langley et al. 2013:5).

Furthermore for process thinkers, in contrast to systems thinkers, it is questionable that any individual is able to direct a social system from outside this system, as if the knower and what is to be known would be separable, a fundamental assumption taken on in system thinking (Griffin, 2002:148). Elias (1997) claims that what is known is emerging from the social practice and can thus not be simply determined from outside this practice. Griffin concludes that 'the subject', i.e. the person who knows, and the 'object', i.e what is to be known, are both mutually involving each other and as such the subject and the object are part of the same, inseparable process (Griffin 2002:148).

Thus, human experience may be perceived as the result of a continuous social process, consisting of many local interactions, each one being 'one moment in a long-term process' (Elias 1997:357). Such a process may be seen as an endless series of social interactions, where various actors are mutually influencing each other in an intentional and directional, but still uncontrollable, manner.

In a similar way, the clash in the project close down meeting can be seen as only one moment in the whole project, and the project itself as one moment in the life of all participants, all having a history of serial, interdependent moments which influenced them in this specific instance of the meeting and somehow leading them to the clash described in my narrative. Seeing the reasons for the clash just within the meeting itself, or just as an outcome of the project, as usually assumed in systems approaches, is, from a process perspective, representing an inadequate abstraction of a complex, long-term social process.

How we make sense of our experience in a specific moment requires to understand the role of time in these social processes.

Centrality of Time in Process Thinking

The continuous and long-term process of meaning-making, drawing on the past and the future, is emphasising the 'centrality of time' (Langley et al., 2013:4). Systems thinking assumes a 'linear understanding' of time (Mowles 2015a:101), where the present is independent from the past and the future (Griffin 2002:184), and time is simply seen as 'the linear predictability of before and after' (ibid:15). In contrast, process thinking perceives social interactions as transcending from 'the past through the present and beyond it into the future', presuming that the 'meaning of past events is to be found in […] the present' (Elias 1997:357). As such, the process of meaning-making is a reconstruction of the past, not a real thing; we can only make sense of the past in the context of the present moment, influenced by our current aspirations of the future (Stacey 2011:319).

Griffin is therefore referring to the 'living present' to denote this moment of meaning-making, attributing to it a circular time-structure where 'the emerging future is constructed, as is the understanding of the past, in the self-organising processes of interaction'. It is in this non-linear interrelationship of the past and the future in the present moment that something novel is coming out, a new and unexpected experience, which makes this process become 'the very essence of experience' (Griffin 2002:15).

So my behaviour in the project close down meeting was not just an act of the moment, driven by past incidents, as something that really happened. Rather, in this specific moment, my past experience got redesigned in social acts of gesturing and responding, affected by my personal intentions as well as by the expectations of the group I belonged to. I used to consider success as something really existing and I wanted this project to be a real success, as obviously my bonus and my career were depending on a positive evaluation of the project results by other people. Thus personal concerns and ambitions influenced my behaviour in this very moment, playing a role in the redesign of my past story in a way to trigger in me, in the very moment, the need to ignore or fight anything which could risk this project to be seen as a failure. Imagining that the behaviours of other people in this meeting were shaped in similar ways while constructing meaning in the living present of this meeting, demonstrates how complex the process of meaning-making of project success is and reveals the importance of personal and group interests in this process.

Power - a Natural Part of Social Interactions

In process thinking, personal and group interests thus seem to be a key element in the redesign of past experiences in the living present, leading Mowles to consider humans to be 'bound by relations of power' (Mowles 2015a:17), a view which relates to another key concept of Elias's process theory, namely power figurations. Figurations are defined as 'a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people' (Dopson 2001:516, referencing Elias 1939:261) they are networks of interdependent individuals which are paradoxically 'enabling and constraining' each other in their relationships. Power in this concept is not to be seen as a property belonging to a certain individual, but rather as a 'structural characteristic of all human relating' (Mowles 2015b:250).

Elias uses 'game models' to analyse the power figurations, as simplified analogies, which provide a good demonstration of both, the processual nature of social development, as well as of the dynamics in the power balance of human interaction (Dopson 2001:519). In these games the different players cooperate and compete, in paradoxical processes of interactions, influenced by their intentionally reconstructed pasts and futures, where a new experience emerges without that anyone could guarantee a pre-conceived outcome (ibid). In contrast to systems thinking where power games are perceived as irrational and dysfunctional human behaviours, in process theories, these power games are a normal part of the social process, and not something we can get rid of or something to be avoided. They belong to all social interactions and should be considered as a constitutive and integral part of the social meaning-making process and thus were also omnipresent in my project: top managers instrumentalising the project to build or defend their careers; the various business departments informally boycotting the project to protect themselves from being victims of efficiency targets; the project team cooperating and competing in a constant struggle to build a state-of-the art IT solution or defending the interests of their departments. I, as the project manager, responsible for the punctual and efficient project delivery, was eager to respect the success criteria defined at the start of the project and thus secure my career aspirations.

These power struggles were then culminating in the project close down meeting where the social processes continued in the local interactions described in my narrative. To understand process thinking, it is crucial to understand how these local interactions, as unitary elements of the social processes, developed between individuals.

Projects and Local Communication

Whereas Elias is focusing on the formation of the wider patterns of relating, Mead, an American philosopher, considered as one of the founders of pragmatism, was investigating how mind and self are emerging out of the social process of local communication (Cronk 2015).

According to Stacey (2011), Mead understood the social act of gesturing and responding as the 'fundamental unit' (ibid:331) of the communicational process. In such an intersubjective process, a gesture of one human being, be it a vocal or a bodily one, is calling forth a response in another human being. The sequence of many gestures and responses is ending up in a 'responsive interaction' (ibid:332), in which meaning lies in the gesture and the response, inseparable, 'as moment in one act' (ibid). Poor communication, from this understanding, implies deficiencies in the social act of relating and not only as a flaw in the communication process, as assumed in contemporary system thinking (ibid).

This way of understanding communication is fundamentally different from the one taken on by systemic theories, where communication is considered to be a straight-forward process, assuming that it must be possible that two human beings are able to exchange messages, using language as a channel, without losing any information and thus guaranteeing an undistorted communication, where the message sent by the sender is supposed to arrive with the same meaning on the receiver side. If this is not the case, it is assumed that the sender did not explain well enough, or that the receiver was not able or willing to understand. It further assumes that conflicting interests, emotions, future aspirations or other human irrationalities can be abstracted from this communication process, and thus guarantee a nearly perfect understanding (Stacey 2011:331). This way of defining communication is based on the sender-receiver model established by Shannon & Weaver of Bell Laboratories in their book "The Mathematical Theory of Communication" - a theory designed to explain the principle of telephone functioning (Shannon & Weaver 1963) and often unthinkingly projected onto social interactions.

In project management, communication is typically understood in a similar way. So for example, it is assumed that project targets can be discussed with, agreed upon and communicated to all key stakeholders. It is further assumed that all these stakeholders will perfectly understand the same thing and make the same sense out of it. Therefore,

from such a view, defining commonly accepted success criteria at the start of the project seems to be a valid technique and is expected to allow to measure success in an objective way. However, as shown in my narrative and as described by Mead, the communication process is far from being frictionless.

For Mead this rather technical understanding of communication is not adequate to understand human interaction. He believes that communication is fundamentally a 'relational process' (Stacey 2011:332) which involves language, using 'significant symbols' (Mead 1934:45) which have similar meaning for the interacting persons, allowing us to anticipate, at least in some way, how others might respond to our gestures. This capacity of human beings to take others' attitude develops and is being generalised, referring to what Mead termed the 'generalised other' (ibid:90), as if we were anticipating a kind of generalised expectation towards us.

This ability to expect others' expectations, allows us to role-play (ibid:73) while gesturing and responding, a kind of inner dialogue, thus becoming an object to ourselves, having the opportunity for reflection and choosing our gestures. As such we become conscious of our being, our self, in the interactive process of communication (Stacey 2011:332–333). This social interaction and the interaction with the self is a source of novelty, a 'participative self-organisation in which both the individual mind and the group/social emerge at the same time' (Griffin 2002:20).

As such, Mead is coming to similar conclusions than Elias, seeing human development as a social process, a process of experience between humans, where the individual and the social are mutually informing each other, with a potential to create something new, and although driven by various intentions, something that is unexpected and uncontrollable by any individual.

Making Sense of Mead's Theory Using my Narrative

Mead's explanation of the act of gesturing and responding reminds me of the conversations before and during the project close down meeting. When getting up in the morning, I was gesturing to myself, role-playing in anticipation of the business critics, reassuring myself that the project must be seen as a success, enumerating all the evidences I believed would prove my case. Obviously I was expecting to be challenged on my view of success. But to reassure myself, I was holding onto the figures proving my

success, as this was the reality that I believed in, influenced by socially constructed thinking of my thought collective.

When entering the meeting room and my boss making me aware of the silence reigning on the other side of the table where the business people were sitting, representing to us an abnormal gesture, consciously made or not, which we interpreted as an indication that something must be wrong. The meaning of this gesture to us was driven by the experiences that my boss and I made during the project, where business people were reluctant to support the project, showing obvious signs of resistance. In such a context, we interpreted the silence of our business colleagues as being a negative sign, anticipating that they might not consider the project to be a success.

During the meeting when presenting project results, gesturing to my business colleagues, I applied significant symbols of the generalised project management terminology when referring to project success, using words such as “delivered in time”, “within budget”, and “as per signed off requirements”, hoping that this language would impress them and believing it to reinforce their acceptance of project success.

I notice now how my gestures, to myself and to my colleagues, were influenced by my anticipation of negative reactions, as unconfirmed assumptions, based on past experiences during project execution and driven by my own interests and the ones of my group. This caused me to take a defensive stance, taking refuge in a language which was more or less meaningless to others and evoking a response calling forth in me anger and disappointment. What then emerged from this continuous act of gesturing and responding could not have been planned and the meeting ended in an unexpected way for all participants.

All these conversations, verbal and non-verbal, in the project close down meeting were part of a long sequence of complex gesturing and responding between many people during the project and beyond, leading to wider patterns of behaviour which no one could control. It is in such non-linear and continuous social processes that the project progressed, where the meaning-making is emerging from subjective interplay within conversations. What is success from such a perspective is emerging from a complex process of many local interactions over time.

Human Relating as Complex Social Processes

In recent decades, complexity thinking has found increasing consideration in the field of project management. Some project management scholars (see Section 3: Dealing with project complexity) admit the limitations of seeing projects as 'simple systems' and recommend to treat them as 'complex adaptive systems' (Pollack & Remington 2007:2), exhibiting complexity characteristics such as: huge and hierarchical systems (a system of sub-systems), non-linear relationships of a high number of interrelated elements (technical systems, project activities, stakeholders,…), a sensitive dependence on initial conditions, the tendency of events to mutually reinforce themselves (positive feedback loops and vicious circles), the propensity of such systems to balance on the edge of chaos (phase transition), and showing self-organising properties out of which new features may emerge. Those scholars are holding on to the holistic principle enriched with major findings from complexity theories of the natural sciences (Pollack & Remington 2007, 2011, Remington & Zolin 2011).

Although acknowledging the difficulties in controlling such complex adaptive systems, it is still assumed that there are specific methods to deal with different types and levels of complexity (Remington & Zolin 2011, Carver & Maylor 2011, Pollack & Remington 2007, 2011). This way, those scholars are holding tight to similar holist and design agency assumptions as the ones assumed by simple project systems.

Other scholars in the field of project management (see Section 3: Dealing with project complexity) have concluded that the complexity of a project is less the result of technical or structural issues (size, number of elements, duration,…), but rather seems to stem from people and their inter-communication. Griffin and Stacey are coming to a similar conclusion and state:

> *from the complex responsive processes perspective it is human relating itself which is complex and uncertain [….]*
>
> *Stacey & Griffin, 2005: 7*

They see in Elias's and Mead's descriptions of the social processes evidence of the concepts of self-organisation and emergence appearing and are pointing to familiarities that process theory has with the contemporary complexity theories and thus understand

the complexity in human environments to stem from social activity itself (Stacey & Griffin, 2005:7).

Complex responsive processes of relating is a way of thinking in the tradition of Hegel, Elias and Mead, building on complex processes of human interaction as part of a wider social process. It is fundamentally different from the scientific and systemic management theories in that it assumes the existence of a social reality, emerging from many dialectical interactions of human beings, claiming that there is no 'objective position' outside these interactions, nor an omnipresent superstructure able to guarantee specific outcomes (Stacey 2011:298–338). Rather, its disciples claim these outcomes to be the result of intentional and powerful local acts of interrelated human beings, as unpredictably leading to wider patterns of social behaviours of groups, organisations and even whole societies (Stacey & Griffin, 2005:7–9).

These patterns are driven by the interplay of 'mutually exclusive, self-referencing' tendencies (Mowles, 2015a:13), interacting reciprocally and simultaneously, where people are forming and being formed (Stacey & Griffin, 2005:33), enabling and constraining each other (ibid:5), and acting as reflexive observers and participants in parallel (ibid:8). It is in these paradoxical conflicts that social patterns arise which are certain and uncertain, predictable and unpredictable, stable and unstable, and controllable and uncontrollable, all at the same time (ibid:17).

Such a view shows the inherently complex human interactions going on in all social undertakings, and thus, also in my project. As already reflected upon in the previous sections on social processes and local interactions, these complex and paradoxical human relations were omnipresent and had a tremendous impact on what happened in the project and its outcomes. Considering a project as being nothing else than complex responsive processes of relating, and not seeing them as a holistic thing, internalising a finalised notion of itself, might be opening other perspectives on project management and project success, as I will try to outline in the upcoming conclusion.

Overall Conclusions and Outlook

In the first project of this doctoral thesis it appeared to me that for many years my thinking has been influenced by a rather rational understanding, based on a scientific world view, using linear explanations for phenomena which I took for real, leaving no room for interpretation. This might also explain my empathy for contemporary project management and change management theories that I feel to be based on a very similar way of thinking as the one prevalent in my thought collective. From this perspective, management of projects and change are considered to be straight-forward approaches to deal with the uncertainties characterising such endeavours and project success is equated to the achievement of a predefined, static target. If we do not succeed to hit this target, it is assumed that we failed and that we did not correctly apply the methods and tools prescribed by both theories.

My experience in the field of project and change management over 25 years, however, could not confirm the accuracy of such a simplified definition of project success, making me challenge my realist understanding. I took interest in project complexity theories, and wondered how they could help to improve the success rate of projects. Though, it appeared to me that these theories, obviously giving excellent insights into natural phenomena, failed to provide adequate explanations for the problems we faced in projects. I felt those problems to be less related to tangible issues, as assumed in numerous studies (cf. Section 3) on this topic, but rather to the people involved in or impacted by the projects, and more specifically by the complex interactions of those people.

Social complexity theories resonate with the experience I had in many projects, exemplified in my narrative described previously. I find the complexity in these projects being preeminently the result of many, more or less intentional and powerful human acts. It is the paradoxical nature of human relating, where people, mutually and simultaneously, enable and constraint each other, which illustrates the inherent complexity of the social process and which is fundamentally different from the linear "either…or" thinking of contemporary project management and change management theories.

This individualistic and rational understanding of human nature invites us to set targets for standardised and static success criteria, in form of the 'iron triangle' (Atkinson 1999),

and then, to apply some generalised and linear methods to achieve exactly these predefined outcomes. Such an approach is doomed to fail, making the high failure rates, so well documented in many project studies, appear quite plausible, or even under-estimated. This trend for simplification may be a response to the intricacies that we are facing in projects and which appear uncontrollable to us. However, I wonder if this tendency to focus primarily on rigid success targets and linear management methodologies, rather than trying to achieve something meaningful for the people involved, admittedly a more challenging target, is the direction to pursue.

I believe that project success cannot be simply expressed in form of abstract success criteria defined at the start of the project by some privileged people. Project success does no more appear to me as something stable, but rather as a moving target. What success is, and was it is not, seems to be evolving over time, along the whole project lifecycle and even beyond. It is the product of continuous negotiations between various stakeholders, in an iterative process of social meaning-making involving past experience as well as future interests of each stakeholder. Therefore, aligning all stakeholders to adhere to the same success criteria, one of the key prerequisites of contemporary change theories, seems to be an objective impossible to achieve, and if ever possible, it will only be a momentary snapshot, until the power balance is shifting towards another side.

So for example, my project was perceived as being a failure at one moment of the project lifecycle, during the close-down meeting, reflecting the conflicting interests and fears prevailing at this moment. But some months later, the same project was overall considered to be a success story: in the meantime the rules of the game had changed, maybe impacted by a shift on top management level resulting in an overthrow of the company's strategy, somehow influencing the existing power structures. In this altering conditions, the stakeholders mutually reconstructed their intentions and expectations, influencing the meaning-making process deciding about success and failure. This experience makes me assume that the process of defining project success is an essentially social and continuous one and does not stop with the closure of the project.

What does this mean for project management? It does not mean that we should not aim for achieving a specific result; complexity theory assumes our future to be characterised by 'predictable unpredictability' (Mowles 2015a:98) and thus does not deny the role of intentions and design in the complex process of meaning-making. Nor do I think that all the methods and tools prescribed by those theories would be wrong or ineffective; on the contrary, in many situations they were quite helpful to structure and organise my

projects, providing me some influence on what I perceived as genuinely uncontrollable. What I do challenge though, is the strong believe of project and change management theories in our ability to foresee outcomes and the emphasis they put on the methods to achieve exactly these outcomes, assuming predictability and linearity of cause and effect. I criticise the tendency to objectify our targets, making them become a reality, as if they were undebatable and voluntarily accepted by all stakeholders. Further, I believe that the seemingly linear methods in use to be inadequate idealisations and 'generalisations' (Stacey, 2011:323) in face of social complexities when targeting change; the application of the methods in our daily practice of meaning-making is inherently complex and context related, and thus not applicable in such a generalised way. These hypothetical methods then often become an end in themselves, blinding us to the complex problems we are facing.

In my narrative, we also demonstrated such behaviour, by failing to consider obvious signs of resistance of our business colleagues, in form of denial to sign of the requirements or an overall lack of support. We preferred instead to focus on our generalised methods and rigid targets, thus ignoring other concerns and perspectives.

I am therefore beginning to question the assumptions of predictability and design agency adopted by the orthodox project and change management theories and argue they may not fulfil the expectations that they call forth.

One might wonder, at this point, what expectations social complexity theories give rise to. For example, some complexity scholars (Pollack & Remington 2007, Cicmil et al. 2009) recommend defining project success criteria more frequently during the project lifecycle and thus take a less rigid approach for defining project success, providing stakeholders the opportunity to adapt success criteria to changing conditions. Such an approach might appear to increase the chances to realise stakeholder alignment, but as evidenced in my narrative, it may also fail as a generalised method: just doing more of what did not work in the first place, a behaviour often demonstrated by the rational approaches, is unlikely to guarantee success. But more importantly, it still ignores that the social processes of meaning-making are continuously ongoing, independent of any formal invitation to do so, and thus such self-organising processes are the 'norm rather than the exception' (Mowles 2015a:125),

My claim would be to accept what actually happens around us, 'taking one's experience seriously' (Stacey & Griffin 2005:22). Whatever success criteria the leaders want to

impose, they need to acknowledge the social processes which are prevailing and out of which emerge the meaning of project success. I accept that leaders are playing a role in this social process of success definition too, and thus influencing it, but, based on Mead's theories I argue that they cannot determine what success criteria will be accepted or supported by the people involved in and impacted by the project. As project managers, we should take a more humble position and be mindful that our interventions, however powerful they might be, are merely participations in these processes of social meaning-making, in a similar way as all other participants, but without a guarantee that our interventions will be leading to the expected results.

> *[…] if organizing is understood essentially as a conversational process, an inescapably self-organizing process of participating in the spontaneous emergence of continuity and change, then we need a rather different way of thinking about any kind of organizational practice that focuses on change.*
>
> *(Shaw 2002:11)*

I am now coming to understand that defining project success criteria at the beginning of a project can only be seen as a moment of participation in complex social processes that are continuously evolving. The resulting success definition of this instant of interacting should not be understood as a prediction of the final outcomes which are accepted by all stakeholders, holding on to those criteria until the end of the project. What the final outcome will be and if it will be considered a success or a failure, is not the product of a single moment of formally defining some success criteria, but is emerging out of ongoing complex responsive processes of relating that no one is able to foresee. However, this does not mean that anything can happen (Stacey 2011:267): the directions a project takes is the result of enabling and constraining negotiations between many stakeholders which are influencing the outcome of the project somehow.

If we thus admit the predictably unpredictable character of social processes, I wonder what this overall means for the total control assumptions taken on by the contemporary project and change management theories. Do we really control what happens in projects? And why is taking over control considered so important in project management? A topic I would like to investigate further in my next project of this doctoral thesis.

2. Research Projects

Research Project 3

Project Management - an Illusion of Control?

Introduction

In Project 2, I described my increasing scepticism towards how traditional project management approaches define project success. They refer to it as an unambiguous concept based on specific and measurable success criteria. These theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009) regard projects as straight-forward and predictable undertakings, and project success as the logical outcome of well thought-through, clearly communicated, and thus widely accepted project success parameters.

In a similar way, project management, since its beginnings in the 1950s, is increasingly seen as the most promising response to the control of non-trivial endeavours. It is considered the method of choice for managing unusual, and thus uncertain situations, enabling us to achieve specific outcomes under time and budget constraints (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009). It is further assumed by these theories that by applying their prescribed methods, project managers must be able to control what goes on in projects, and that this control allows them to achieve the pre-defined goals. From such a perspective, project management may be seen as a synonym for control.

This was, however, not my experience during my many years working as a project manager. Rather, I found it difficult, if not impossible, to secure the achievement of the pre-determined outcomes through controlling every facet of my projects, despite dogmatically adhering to the traditional project and change management prescriptions. This makes me increasingly doubtful of our capacity as project managers to fully control the achievement of project success, an ability which is nowadays assumed to be one of the main traits and competences of talented and successful project managers.

My personal experience is confirmed by several studies on the success of IT projects, as mentioned in my second research project (cf. research project 2: 1. Introduction), where it appeared that more than half of IT projects are still considered failures, despite an increased adoption of more professional project management approaches over the last twenty years.

In the following, I will challenge this taken for granted ability of project managers to control the achievement of predicted outcomes, and explore why control might be so important to us and what other ends this desperate strive for control might serve.

Before delving into questions of control within projects, I will first describe an insightful incident about "control" in my personal life, where, under very stressful and emotional conditions, I displayed patterns of behaviour very similar to those usually demonstrated in my professional projects when seemingly exercising control. Aside from the concept of control within my professional experience, this personal event also prompted me to question how project management theories come to idealise control in such a dogmatic way. Thus, this personal event, in combination with my professional experience, may help to illustrate another meaning of control in a professional context.

A Personal Experience with Control

This personal story took place some years ago when my father was diagnosed with leukaemia. After the initial shock had worn off, I immediately started to inform myself about this disease and its possible treatments. I felt that I had to step in to make sure that my father would receive the best possible treatment. Therefore, during his stay at the hospital, I took care of everything, discussing his treatment with the doctors and his daily care with the nurses.

Every morning before going to the office, I quickly popped over to the hospital to check on him. The nurses, not used to dealing with visitors so early in the morning, somehow tolerated my presence and, after a while, even made sure to have his blood test results ready for me to check. I knew that in the case of leukaemia, blood parameters are of crucial importance and, similarly to how I would have done in my job, I used them as key performance indicators to assess my father's health status. If the figures were fine, I felt that I had the problem under control. Today, I realise that I was often busier organising my father's daily treatments than actually taking care of him. I cannot even recall if we ever discussed how he felt. Similarly to what I had learned to do in my profession as a project manager, I focused on what I considered to be of real importance, in this case dealing with his medical issues.

The day he passed away, I was sitting on his bed reading his blood test results. The numbers were fine, but he still did not make it. I was unable to comprehend how this could happen. When I had first brought him to the hospital several weeks earlier, I had promised myself to get him out of there, and not to allow him to die in hospital. I failed. I remember that my first feelings were not just of sadness; I felt anger too. I was angry

with the doctors and nurses for their inability to cure him, and I was angry with myself for having lost control.

At the time, I never related this rationalised and stereotypic behaviour to my professional background, despite the patterns being clearly recognisable. Indeed, project managers are expected to demonstrate such rational behaviour. It may even be this prospect of control that drew me to project management in the first place. I had always assumed that managing projects meant mastering difficult and unusual situations, and I considered project management methods to be the holy grail, enabling me to control and circumnavigate any given situation I may encounter, much like a sea captain withstanding a stormy sea and safely navigating his ship towards calm waters.

I held onto this heroic image of a project manager for many years, and in my current job as a Project and Change Management Consultant, I am often still confronted with this mythological interpretation of the role. I am usually called into situations where projects worth many millions of Euros are stuck or likely to fail. I am asked to evaluate the project status and find solutions for getting back on track. It is assumed that someone with a proven track record of seemingly successful projects, coupled with being a highly qualified project and change management professional, must be able to analyse the situation and identify the causes that brought the project into trouble in the first place. It is further assumed that I control the magic triggers, and can pull them at will to redress whatever went wrong in the time before I was called into the project. I am simply expected to get things back under control, an expectation that I have been increasingly struggling with for quite some time, as I will outline in the following narrative.

Narrative - Managing a Project Crisis

First Contact

One of my former colleagues, now working for a subsidiary of a foreign bank in Luxembourg, called to ask me if I could help them redress a project which they had been unable to deliver for nearly two years. The project's objective was to replace one of their core banking systems. Despite receiving support from external consultants, they had not been successful in moving forwards with the implementation of the new system. The

project was close to being abandoned but the company management was ready to give it one last chance.

My first contact with the customer was an interview with two of its subsidiary managers. In this meeting, I presented the main reasons why projects usually turn into disasters, building upon some renowned project management studies and statistics. They listened eagerly, and were immediately able to apply these general causes for project failure to their own project. They seemed relieved to finally have an explanation for their problems, and concluded that they had to show my slides to the top manager of the parent company, claiming "he will finally understand that we are not the only ones having such problems", as if this would be a good enough excuse for explaining their powerlessness in the face of disaster.

Following the interview, they promptly offered me a contract to manage the project. I hesitated to take on such a role. I was intimidated by what I anticipated to be a huge challenge. If they had been unable to deliver the project for such a long time, this must be for good reason. I wondered if I would really be able to help them redress the situation and if I should take the risk. With this in mind, I proposed instead to coach their newly assigned and unexperienced project manager once or twice a week, and to advise him on what to do to get the project back on track. After some discussion, they accepted this idea.

I left the meeting room with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was happy that my well-presented arguments had convinced them, and that I had won a new contract. On the other hand, I could sense the high expectations that had been triggered by my performance, and even felt a sense of guilt for the marketing show that I had just pulled off. I knew only too well that this would not be a trivial intervention, and I was not at all sure if I could really do anything to help them. But, after all, they paid good money, and I could not allow such a lucrative opportunity to pass me by.

Taking Control

Soon after this conversation, one of the subsidiary managers introduced me to the company's employees as the new "messiah" who would finally make this project happen. Unsurprisingly, the expectations of the project team and stakeholders were high. I felt pressure to get the project under control quickly, and began my challenging mission as I usually do in similar situations.

Together with the internal project manager, I implemented some standard project management processes such as splitting the project into smaller and thus more manageable parts, reorganising and planning the project accordingly, assigning new roles and responsibilities, setting up additional monitoring and reporting structures in order to increase the transparency, and some other useful measures: all measures that I have implemented countless times in previous projects. I felt that I was in my element, in charge and in control.

One of the techniques I often use when taking control of a project is to organise a planning workshop. Planning is seen as the key discipline when referring to project management. In fact, the word "project" comes from the Latin word "projectum", from the Latin verbs "proicere" (to throw forth) and "iacere" (to do), and thus originally meant "before an action". As such, it invites us to think before acting, in the form of planning (Harper 2017). The purpose of such a planning workshop is to determine in detail exactly what needs to be done in order to achieve the project objectives. I prepared the workshop thoroughly, designing a first draft of a master plan which I considered to be the best response to the circumstances of this specific project, and documenting rational arguments to justify this approach in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. I wanted to involve the project team in this exercise to increase the chances that they would adhere to the collectively designed plan, and hopefully even consider it as their own.

As I kicked off the meeting by detailing the purpose of the workshop and its agenda, someone interrupted me to challenge the fact that I had already prepared a project approach: "Why are we doing this workshop then, if everything has already been set?" Glancing around the table, I felt some of the participants returning my gaze, as if they silently agreed with him. I countered the argument by explaining that planning is not an isolated exercise solely involving the project manager, and that involving key players in order to profit from their know-how is a recognized practice in project management. I added that, considering the time constraints on the project, I had prepared a framework with the key milestones, and this would now need to be discussed with the group in more detail. As there were no further contests to the workshop agenda, I concluded that my justifications had been good enough to eliminate any concerns about the approach.

I continued the workshop by presenting the details of the plan that I had prepared with the project manager. After a while, some participants joined the discussion to provide ideas for key activities that needed to be done. The discussion appeared to be quite

constructive until one participant raised his concerns about the modular delivery approach proposed in my plan. He claimed that these milestones would be tough to achieve. I had chosen this phased approach as I wanted to demonstrate that we could release parts of the software to production quite early. I was concerned about the fact that top management had not seen any delivery for nearly two years and believed that delivering a valuable quick win in a few months' time would definitely demonstrate our ability to drive the project.

Undoubtedly, this approach was quite ambitious and required the project team to increase the work pace. This did not seem problematic to me. I had delivered more aggressive schedules in previous projects and had no intention of changing my approach. The project manager had raised similar concerns in a previous conversation, but I could convince him that this was the right approach under the specific circumstances of this project, despite the pressure that this would put on the team.

Unfortunately, this comment on the phased approach triggered the interest of some other participants in the workshop. Their concerns were related to the fact that the plan gave preference to one business line over another in terms of deliveries. One participant from the seemingly disadvantaged business line argued against the phased project approach, claiming that it would not be feasible. She could not understand why her team members should help with the implementation of the first milestone when they could already be starting work on the project delivery for their own department, currently scheduled for a later milestone. The team leader from the other business line defended the proposed project approach, stating that he could understand the rationale behind this plan to make the whole project team work on one delivery first, independent of their business line provenance. He underlined his statement by claiming that we were one project team, and that they would do the same for the other business line.

As the discussion became increasingly heated, I glanced over to the project manager to make him understand that we could not concede and that he should intervene; changing the project deliveries was not an option for us as the first milestone was much easier to achieve and carried less risk. We had previously agreed that to reassure top management we needed this quick win implemented as soon as possible. The project manager did not react, and I was compelled to intervene myself. I supported the argument of the business line that was to be served first, claiming that we needed to keep in mind what was best for the project and forget our personal agendas for the moment. This argument did not fail to achieve its intended effect; no one wanted to be responsible, given the current

critical situation, for hindering the progress of the project, and challenging the external expert was not considered appropriate. The team leader who had expressed her concerns over the approach seemed rather intimidated by the factual arguments that had been brought forward by the other team leader and by myself. When, finally, the project manager addressed her quite harshly, somehow repeating our arguments and inviting him to take on a more constructive attitude, stop his department egoism and start to put on a project hat instead, I could see her literally sink down in her chair as a sign of capitulation in front of all these well-reasoned arguments.

The meeting continued without further conflict as details were clarified and the phased approach was approved by all participants.

At that time, it was clear to me that not all participants fully agreed with our approach, but I still hoped that they would come to understand the rational reasoning behind it and, sooner or later, support it.

Illusion of Control

Over the next 4 months, we implemented the key functionality of the new system and managed to achieve two major milestones. Everyone seemed generally satisfied with how we were progressing, and whenever I discussed progress with the team members, they confirmed that the direction was clear and they felt things were finally moving forward.

As with any other project, however, we did encounter issues. Several delays had to be compensated for by reassigning key resources more efficiently across sub-projects. Although this is not unusual in projects, these continuous adaptations to unexpected difficulties did result in increased pressure on the team over time, in turn leading to growing frustrations. We noticed that some team leaders had started to challenge our decisions, and we had increasing difficulty convincing them to adhere to the new directions. Thus far, however, we had managed to keep them on side. At least, this is what I believed.

One day, I came in for my weekly visit, enthusiastically taking the stairs to the project manager’s office. I looked forward to hearing the latest news on the project since my previous visit the week before. On my way, I bumped into one of the bank managers. She expressed how satisfied she was with the progress made so far, and added that I

should not hesitate to call her if we needed anything. I continued on my way to the project manager's office, glad that everything seemed to be going well.

Upon entering his office, I immediately noticed that something was wrong. He was slumped in his seat, his face was pale, and I wondered if he would start crying. Seeing him so desperate, I was worried that something terrible had happened, and asked him what was wrong. He moaned: "Everything is wrong here! Nobody is following the plans. They just do what they want and do not respect me". His voice trembled, and his facial expression revealed his despair. I felt embarrassed to see him in such a desolate condition, and didn't really know what to say. I invited him to tell me what exactly had happened.

He explained that the team was mobbing him and planned to send a formal complaint to management about the aggressive implementation strategy and resulting pressure on them. As he described the situation, he defended himself, pointing to the fact that the plans had been made together with the team and that they had all been involved. He questioned how they dare reproach him for putting too much pressure on them, almost shouting these words out while underlining them by banging his fist on the table. I could understand his frustration, as I also believed that we had sufficiently involved the whole team in the planning exercise. I nodded in agreement with what he said, although I did not say a word. He continued in the same excited manner, assigning responsibility to the team for the dilemma we found ourselves in, as, after all, they had not stuck to their own plans in the first place and had therefore generated the delays which now made our schedule seem aggressive. He then sank back in his chair, expressing his disappointment that the burden had now fallen on him, and sighing that he only wanted the best for the project. I could literally see him crumbling under this heavy pressure and nodded again to show my empathy and understanding for what he was going through. To be honest, I did not really feel sympathy for this emotional outburst. Although I could understand his disappointment with the team's reaction, I found it misplaced to react in such an emotional way in a professional context. I was not even really listening to his explanations, as I had already switched to solution mode, thinking what I could do to redress the situation.

I was abruptly drawn away from my thoughts as he leaned forward towards me and added, in a somewhat threatening tone, that we were together in the same boat, as, after all, he had only been executing my orders. He looked at me provocatively, as if to say: "Do something, this is your fault too!". I was quite surprised by this reaction. Not so

much the fact that he saw me implicated in the problem, but rather the way he expressed it. I perceived his words, and even more so his body language, the undertone of his voice and the penetrating look, as a veritable menace. I would not have expected such intimidating tactics from him, especially just moments after being so close to a nervous breakdown. I was perplexed.

My initial feeling of pity vanished, replaced by a need to defend myself. How dare he try to hand over responsibility to me? I rather saw the reason for the problems in his obvious lack of sensitivity when dealing with team matters. How often did I have to clean up the mess left behind him while his team mates came to me to complain about his harsh leadership style? I found it unfair that he tried to pass the buck to me and reassured myself that I could not be held responsible for what happened in their daily practice. I had, after all, for some time now been intervening in the project on a weekly basis only, acting as little more than his coach. Who would seriously believe that this was my fault? I was eager to bring up all these arguments in my defence, but somehow was unable to do so.

Perhaps this was because I did perceive some truth in his accusation. In that moment, I felt guilty and disappointed in myself. I wondered how I had not seen this coming. Was I so focused on my methods that I had ignored what was really happening in the field? Even worse, if the project team really hadn't stuck to the plan, as the project manager had just insinuated, would that mean that the next production delivery was at risk? I suddenly recalled my earlier encounter with the subsidiary manager. She believed that I had everything under control. Pretty soon she would be aware that I did not, and that we were probably going to miss a major milestone. Would she still view me as the saviour of the project?

These thoughts simultaneously crossed my mind in this moment of interaction. Although I felt angered at being blamed for everything despite having barely been present, I also felt ashamed that with all my competence and experience I had not anticipated these problems. But I suppressed these emotions, feeling a strong desire to get things back under control. Ignoring his accusations, I declared: "Well, then it's time I get things back on track again". I had somehow automatically reverted to a professional and rational mode and was taking back the lead.

Reflections on my Behavioural Patterns

When reflecting on this experience today, I recognise some recurring patterns in my behaviour that are triggered when I am confronted with difficult situations, be they professional or of a more personal nature:

- Firstly, I tend to trust scientific methods, believing that they will inevitably lead to an expected result in any project. In the narrative, the project management methods which I rely on represent this seemingly scientific framework. The linear relationship between cause and effect that underlies this way of thinking provided me with the feeling of having things under control, i.e. by simply applying these methods correctly, I believed I could secure the outcome. This also becomes apparent in non-professional situations, for example, when I focused on my father's treatment as the means for improving his chances of survival.

- A second recognisable pattern is the need to ensure that these methods are applied, and consequently influencing others to adhere to these measures in the way that I believe is required to achieve a specific outcome. In the case of my father's disease, this pattern became obvious when I began monitoring his medical treatment, becoming increasingly present in the hospital, and even using medical test results to seemingly control the progress of the treatment. Finally, in the crisis project, I imposed my project approach on the project team, believing that this was the only way to achieve the required results.

- A further pattern is recognisable in how I deal with emotions, seemingly taking on a rational attitude when faced with the anxiety of losing a parent or when confronted by highly uncertain situations in my projects. These methods seem to help me to repress my emotions, which I regard as inefficient and hindering in my quest for control in such situations, as they distort my judgment and influence my decisions.

Rationality - a Definition

These patterns of behaviour clearly illustrate the basic assumptions of rational management theories that I have adopted for so many years, having been influenced by the reinforcement of scientific thinking in my education and training. I use the term

"rational" here in the sense of Barbara Townley's 'disembedded' and 'disembodied' rationality (Townley 2008:23–24). Townley builds on critical social theory to analyse rationality in the areas of Human Resource Management, performance measurement and public-sector management initiatives. She defines rationality as based upon the supremacy of reason and the domination of scientific thinking. Such a way of understanding rests on the indestructible foundations of an objective truth and follows a linear logic, based on systematic, sensible and practical reasoning. In this sense, rational tools are characterised as generalisable, timeless and universal laws which can be applied independent of any use case and thus 'disembedded' from any context. This form of rationality assumes the existence of independent and detached actors who can analyse from above or outside in an objective and value-free manner, making them appear as 'socially disembodied beings". This decontextualised and de-socialised approach leads, according to Townley, to the 'dominance of a means-end instrumental rationality' (Townley et al. 2003:1045) that is also observable in my narratives.

It now becomes obvious to me that for many years I have been relying, somewhat blindly, on this scientific understanding of my social environment. However, influenced by my personal and professional narratives, I am increasingly aware that the total control paradigm advocated by contemporary theories on project management is rather unrealistic, and the linear relationship between the scientific methods and their expected outcomes cannot be guaranteed in social contexts. This raises the question of why I, along with many other project managers, still adhere so strictly to these methods even though they cannot secure project results. What else could our motivation be to stick to such reasoned and logical approaches, if not to secure these expected outcomes?

Project Management - Control of Outcomes?

According to Mintzberg, an internationally renowned author on organisational management and strategic planning, the reliance upon methods and tools as a primary means of achieving organisational change is leading to an 'obsession with control' (Mintzberg 1994: 202). He questions the widely accepted assumption in scientific western thinking that this methodological approach prepares planners for all eventualities (ibid: 203). Instead, he sees in it an 'illusion of control' (ibid: 210) based on wishful thinking rather than on the realities of organisational environments. Planning as prescribed by those theories is, according to Mintzberg, likely to lead to exactly the contrary of what is intended. He believes that the frequently adopted detached planning approaches are leading to a focus on the 'journey rather than the destination' (ibid: 197), with planning becoming an end to itself, a kind of self-fulfilling proficiency. This is also demonstrated in my crisis project, where the adoption of the plan became my main concern, as I assumed that it would be sufficient to secure the planned outcome. Furthermore, Mintzberg sees planned change as being too inflexible to cope with organisational problems and, as such, likely to generate resistance to the planned change (ibid: 175–176). Unsurprisingly, such defensive behaviours did become apparent in my narrative as a response to the rigid plan that I tried to impose. The generically designed project approach, although relying on a recognised theoretical basis, was increasingly challenged by the project team as they found it too aggressive and did not believe it delivered the value that they expected.

Mintzberg concludes that the act of planning by coordinating people's actions may not, after all, be an 'apolitical, objective exercise', but rather 'undermined by the pursuit of self-interest through confrontation and conflict' (Mintzberg 1994:188). He thus challenges the supposedly rational motives for achieving objective and efficient outcomes of traditional management approaches.

This depoliticisation and depersonalisation of organisational change is what other scholars also criticise in their research on management methods and the correlation they make to predetermined outcomes.

Cicmil & Hodgson (2006:111), two scholars in the field of project management, allude to the mediocre results achieved in projects. Pointing to the disparity between the increasing maturity of rational project management instruments and their effective

appliance, they criticise that project management theories mainly build upon linear prescriptions of design, planning and monitoring to control complex projects, and even believe that this instrumental approach is 'at the heart of project failure' (ibid: 114) as it ignores a sensitivity to aspects of human interaction.

Bent Flyvbjerg, a professor of major programme management, sees planning research as being predominantly based on an 'analytical rationality' following universal laws assumed to be 'invariable in time and space' and thus coming close to a 'scientific ideal' (Flyvbjerg 2004:4). He claims that such a view is insufficient as it is too generic for practice. Flyvbjerg (2004:7) calls for a more pragmatic approach, where the particular is favoured over the general, and where praxis and experience are prioritised. He believes that instrumental rationality needs to be balanced by a 'value-rationality' that is more concerned with addressing 'problems that matter' and 'in ways that matter' (ibid:2), and thus considering the diversity of interests and the power relations between those involved (ibid:9).

Stacey (2012) reproaches contemporary management approaches for relying mainly on 'tools of rational analysis' and 'rational monitoring procedures' to design and monitor in order to ultimately maintain control (ibid:40). He claims that intentionally applying rational mechanisms of control, in the form of methods and tools, to achieve predicted outcomes, is based on a misleading rational and linear causality which he considers to be a simplistic way to understand human collaboration. Similar to Flyvbjerg, Stacey understands methods and tools as 'second order abstractions', as generalisations and simplifications, which must be particularised in the situational experience (ibid:48–49) through processes of conversation between human agents in the 'ordinary politics of daily organisational life' (ibid:51).

These authors all challenge the widespread belief that the sole purpose of these rational approaches lies in the achievement of pre-designed outcomes. Rather, they suspect that these linear approaches mainly serve other ends, such as to control people and to deal with the anxieties of those exercising this control.

My experience leads me to draw similar conclusions. My need for control over situations was also a means of imposing my own interests on others. At the start of my mission, the board members, the project manager, and the team, all seemed to believe in my capacity to deliver where they had failed for so long. Their high expectations, although flattering, put considerable pressure on me, arousing my own fears that I may fail to meet their

over-inflated ambitions. At the same time, I was apprehensive about the various constraints which had made it impossible to deliver this project in its organisational context in the two years before my arrival. I therefore felt compelled to prove my competence and deliver something valuable for the customer within a short timeframe. These influences led me to favour an iterative implementation approach, in order to be able to deliver quick results. I was eager to defend this approach in front of all the participants in the workshop and imposed an approach which also met my ambitions, thus allowing me to deal with my fears of failure. So, it is not only about applying linear tools for controlling a planned outcome; their application is influenced by a person's very personal preferences and emotional states. My personal experience demonstrates the absurdity of excessive rational control even more clearly. I tried to influence my father's healing process by applying control processes which were supposed to secure this outcome. It is obvious that this was an aimless approach; I rather needed the feeling of control to counter the occurrence of a painful event, and this control was reduced to the process, as it was all that I could control. The outcome, unluckily, was not controllable.

I suggest that the widespread diffusion of the rational approaches in the management theories does not serve only to control planned outcomes. I rather wonder if their successful diffusion is not mainly related to dealing with our own aspirations and fears. Certainly, the political and emotional dimensions, as suspected by the authors mentioned above, play a significant role in this seemingly rational approach.

This drives me to examine project control from different angles, rather than seeing control as a rational means for achieving specific outcomes, as a depoliticised and a depersonalised approach. Therefore, power and emotion, and their role in project control, will form my focus over the next chapters of this research project.

Control and Power

The Role of Power in Rational Control

As concluded in the previous section, due to its inability to secure the planned outcomes, there must be other reasons for the triumph of rational control in the project management world. One of them is related to the human characteristic of imposing one's own motives and interests on others. The socio-political context is an integral part of this supposedly rational process, that cannot be avoided and should not be ignored, if we want to understand what is happening around us.

Mintzberg (1994) concludes from his research that detached and inflexible planning approaches do not provide the control that planners expect, and claims that one of the reasons for an overemphasis on planning in organisations is the desire of the planners to pursue their own objectives when planning for change (ibid:191–192). As such, he believes that these planners are biased towards a specific kind of change, which they intend to impose on others, and that planning activities are to be seen as intentional and purposeful control interventions. Planning in this sense becomes a synonym for deciding over others. I used such techniques myself in the crisis project described above, for example, when organising a planning workshop. This workshop did not only serve the purpose of discussing the project approach, and thus involving others to ask for their opinions. I used it as a technique to convince others to adhere to a plan that I, as a seemingly detached analyst of the situation, had previously worked out. So, this plan was not meant only as a rational tool for organising a project in an objective way to achieve a specific project target, but also as a reflection of my intentions and anxieties, in the form of a project approach that I considered to be helpful for achieving my own aspirations, namely, providing quick results and thus demonstrating my competence.

My focus, therefore, was very much on applying my methods, and less on considering the context of the crisis project itself. It is in this sense that Flyvbjerg & Richardson (2002:44–46) regard scientific thinking in planning theories problematic, claiming that it is too focused on "what should be done", instead of trying to understand "what is actually done". All too often, people who apply these rational methods abstract the effects of what are commonly considered human irrationalities when applying tools, and as such ignore what is actually going on in their projects. Similarly, in my project, I was eager to set up a plan and move urgently forward with its implementation, driven by the

high expectations of my customer. I did not take the time to understand what was going on around me, or try to get a feeling for what had made it so difficult in the past to implement the project in this social environment. I focused instead on what I thought needed to be done. In this attempt to simplify matters, I had dismissed the consequences of conflicts occurring while using these methods, as if they were value-free and context-free means to achieve intended outcomes. Flyvbjerg & Richardson call for a 'turn towards the dark side of planning theory - the domain of power' and claim that the concept of power is underestimated in theorising planning, and that planning theories have failed to understand the role of power in exercising control. They believe these theories to be built upon an assumption of 'consensus amongst equal participants' and thus to mostly ignore the significant effects of power, a view that they understand to be a utopian and idealised interpretation of what actually happens in everyday human communication.

The aspiration for conflict-free consensus in traditional management theories, assuming that people suppress their own interests for the sake of a collectively desired outcome, led me, in my narrative, to organise a planning workshop. I was convinced that it must be possible to find a solution which would be accepted and adopted by all participants. But, at the same time, I was eager to impose an approach which best fitted my own aspirations for recognition and for dealing with my anxieties to fail. On the one hand, I was taking on a rational attitude, relying on my realist's belief that, with my expertise, I had identified the right approach, and this would necessarily lead to the expected outcomes. With the same mindset, I also assumed that the other participants, as logical human beings, must be naturally led to adopt the irresistible logic of my plans. I was, on the other hand, driven by my own ambitions, feeling the need to control the outcomes of the workshop.

This shows the intentional, if not to say manipulative, character of most control mechanisms, and irrefutably denies the impersonal and value-free quality that traditional management theories often attribute to rational control. Fineman & Sturdy (1999), two organisational researchers of managerial control processes, conclude from their studies that control is not a "neutral process, painlessly directed toward legitimate ends such as efficiency", and that control processes simply mirror the power structures prevailing in organisations (ibid: 631). They claim that,

> *Control operates in contestable terrains, shaped by different forms of actor resistance, cooperation, and compliance, to morally questionable means and/or ends*
>
> *Fineman & Sturdy (1999:632)*

Cicmil & Hodgson (2006:118–119), alike, reproach traditional project management theories for, first and foremost, serving as 'covert tools of manipulation and exploitation' and call for an approach which is more sensitive to the power dimension in project settings. I find their choice of terms 'covert' and 'manipulation' quite relevant in the context of my planning workshop: it reminds me that I had set up this workshop also to impose my own ideas on the other participants, to make them adhere to my approach irrespective of their desires and interests.

For this purpose, I did not disclose my own intentions during the workshop, claiming instead that my sole goal was to find the right solution. I was prepared to secretly manipulate others to satisfy my own interests. Of course, I had good intentions of making the project progress, building on my expertise to decidedly lead them in the direction which I believed necessary. But, I also intended to satisfy my own desire for recognition, by imposing an approach which best suited this intention, using my standing as an external expert as a means of power to control any tendencies towards opposition. I did this by pretending to rely on a widely acknowledged rational argument, apparently based on objective, value-free, and therefore superior reasoning. During the workshop I insinuated that others not adhering to this logic must be driven by irrational motivations.

Scott (1990), a political scientist who has researched strategies of resistance in response to domination, refers to 'public and hidden transcripts' to explain such behaviours. The 'public transcript' describes what may be openly communicated (ibid: 2), in my case, the rational goal of the workshop to secure the design of an objective project approach supported by all participants. However, if we take what is happening in our social environments seriously, we cannot assume that only the formal discourse is important, but need to be aware that people may also be following their own strategies which they do not necessarily disclose in formal settings. Scott calls these undisclosed strategies 'hidden transcripts' (ibid: 4), referring to intentions discussed only behind the scenes, and hidden in public. My 'hidden transcript' refers to my intention to impose the approach that I considered most suitable for achieving my own goals, while pretending

to be interested in the opinions of other participants and claiming to involve them in the decision.

The exercise of control is therefore always also a manipulative and largely hidden act used to influence others and make them do things that they would otherwise not necessarily do (Morgan 2006:166). However, this view of control underlies an individualistic understanding of the concept of power, based on the same linear means and end correlation underlying rational control.

Power - an Individualist Concept?

The assumption that we can manipulate others by using rational tools while hiding our own intentions does not take into account that others may do the same to us, and thus falsely assumes that our seemingly rational choices are independent from other people's actions.

As already referenced in my first two research projects, such individualistic thinking relies on a realist worldview, where power is located in autonomous agents which are expected to be able to choose the right strategies to control their environments and apt to influence others in a way to follow their direction (Crozier & Friedberg 1977; Morgan 2006). Such an understanding of power was also underlying my actions when, in my initial interview with the board members, I sold them a vision building upon the assumption that a single person, independent from others, would be able to define and implement a strategy ultimately leading to success. The board members demonstrated a very similar realist understanding of power, as they felt relieved that someone would finally lead them out of their odyssey, seeing in me the messiah who knew what to do and was able to solve all the problems that they had been unable to circumvent for so long.

Stacey (2012) critiques the widespread belief in management literature that leaders are the ones to define and implement visionary strategies. He believes that this is a highly idealistic and simplistic view of human nature that does not consider the 'threats to identity, power relations, conflicting ideologies, conflictual politics and anxiety' (Stacey 2012:80–85). From such a perspective, my intention to align the team so as to convince them to follow my way of setting up the project abstracts the human dimension and is thus unlikely to have any meaningful or sustainable impact on their behaviour. On the contrary, it is very likely that such an approach will generate quite the opposite,

effectively counteracting what I had intended to achieve, as so well demonstrated by the project team in my narrative.

Ignoring, or at least deprioritising, the various prevailing interests that all stakeholders must have had in this workshop, was not a promising strategy. The assumptions that I took on in this very moment are especially surprising, in the sense that I was well aware of my own interests and manipulative strategies, having a clear view of what I wanted to be the outcome of this workshop, a goal that I was not ready to give up easily. So, how could I realistically assume that the interests of others would not come into play in a similar way to mine? And, more importantly, how could I believe that, even though people appeared to accept the outcomes of the workshop, they would in their future actions simply put away their own interests for the sake of a higher cause?

In the following section I will present another viewpoint, where rational control is put back into the social context of interest-driven and interdependent actors.

Rational Control as a Socio-Political Process

Based on their research on the relationship between rational control and power, Flyvbjerg & Richardson (2002:44–46) conclude that rationality is always 'penetrated by power' (ibid: 50) and claim, therefore, that rationality and power cannot be viewed in isolation (ibid: 48). They build their research upon Foucault's theory of power, claiming that rationality cannot be 'context-free and objective' (ibid: 52), and that power is omnipresent in every human interaction. For them, human 'action is the exercise of power' (ibid: 54) and thus any act of rational control must also be seen as a powerful move of the ones trying to exercise this control (ibid: 59).

From this perspective, power is a characteristic of every human interaction, thus leading us to another understanding of the concept of power. To explain this important shift in my thinking, in the following section I draw on Foucault's view of power.

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher, historian, social theorist and philologist who researched the relationship between power and knowledge, and how they are used as a form of social control through societal institutions. Foucault (1982:779–789) was mainly interested in the evolution of institutions and concluded that they emerge out of specific 'disciplines' which have, over time, created their own 'discourse' (ibid:788). This discourse relates to rules, in the form of a 'code of normalisations' leading to the

development of 'regulated and concerted systems' of control around the activities of people, which make them work and behave in certain ways considered beneficial for projected outcomes. The discourse then becomes a 'disciplining power', a mechanism which enables the control of people through 'the use of simple instruments of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments and examination' (Foucault 1977:170).

Contradictory to the individualistic perception of power mentioned earlier, Foucault's disciplining power is not exercised by some autonomous individuals but rather is a social phenomenon, where all agents are subject to disciplining influences, even those supposedly leading others. As such, disciplining power consists of 'institutionalized techniques of discipline' (Stacey 2012:85) affecting a wider population and not directed to specific individuals.

Another key difference to the individualist view lies in Foucault's understanding of how power is exercised in a local context. Foucault (1982) claims that power specifies the relations between individuals, and as such sees power as 'a way in which certain actions modify others' or, put differently, as a mode of human action that acts upon other people's actions (ibid: 788–789). The exercise of power consists of influencing the behaviour of others, and in this way framing their possible range of actions. From such a perspective, power is a relational concept rather than an individual one, and power relations are 'rooted deep in the social nexus' (ibid: 791).

Foucault, thus, takes a fundamentally social perspective, where people's conduct is always affected by the actions of others while, simultaneously, their own actions structure other people's behaviour. Over time, these interactions favour the generation of specific institutionalised patterns of behaviours that no one can fully control, nor escape, not even the most powerful. These patterns, resulting from the various power relations between individuals, then, in turn, form power relations, resulting in a complex web of mutually structuring human interactions.

I understand Foucault's concept of disciplining power in a similar way to Elias's process theory and his concept of power figurations, as described in my second research project for this thesis. Elias et al. (1997:356–360) concludes that social structures are the result of these power figurations, in form a network of human interactions, where, as various agents interact, they mutually enable and constrain each other, leading, through a historical process, to wider social patterns. These, in turn, also affect the local interactions. In Elias' and Foucault's theories, power thus plays a crucial role, as they

accredit it with a structuring quality of human relating rather than being the property of several individuals, where the local and the social are equally part of the same process.

From this, I conclude that in my narrative I was not purely driven by my rational analysis of the situation leading to a logic conclusion of what needed to be done. This rational approach to problematic situations can be seen as the institutionalised influence of scientific thinking in the tradition of western societies. At the same time, however, I was also affected by more local patterns, where my expectations of other people's expectations affected my behaviour in a more direct way. For example, I felt that everyone expected that I would take control of the situation and ultimately lead the project to a successful outcome. These perceived expectations aroused a desire for recognition within me, which led me to take over the leadership role in the project, making decision and feeling responsible for making things move forward. In parallel, I felt under pressure, which raised fears of failure in me, guiding me to increase my need for control. So, my behaviour cannot be simply explained as if I were only driven by a rational argumentation, taking objective decisions independently from my social context. Certainly, I influenced other people but they, simultaneously, were influencing me, and we all were influenced in our behaviour by our societal background. It seems unlikely to be able to control the outcome of such complex patterns of local interactions in a wider social discourse.

From all these theories on power, I am drawn to conclude that my experience with rational control in project management is ambiguous. The processes and methods that we use in project management are all quite helpful for doing our job as project managers and for many years I considered these tools as being the warranters for project success. I still consider these tools as helpful and even necessary for managing projects adequately, but I now also consider that the application of these tools evolves through power-laden actions that paradoxically enable and constrain those involved. Putting these abstract tools into a social context results in interest-driven and complex human interactions that nobody can control, at least not in the sense of achieving predefined outcomes. This compels me to challenge the linear assumptions of rational control, and increasingly doubt the noble cause that these rational approaches claim to pursue.

Project control is thus not only a question of securing outcomes but also relates to defending interests in a social context. However, when our interests are challenged by others, no matter what their actions, we are confronted by feelings which in some way must affect our behaviour. In his research on emotional experience in performance

management, Nicholas Sarra (2006: 90) sees power relations as an "object for emotions" and claims that they are "lived affectively as [a] whole body experience" (ibid: 93). This raises the question of what role emotions play in the social process of exercising control, a topic that I will explore in more detail in the next section of this research project.

Control and Emotions

Introduction

Experience shows me that the source of my continuous struggle to achieve control in my projects cannot only be seen in securing pre-planned outcomes, nor is it merely explainable by a need to exercise power over others. As outlined in the previous sections both endeavours are unlikely to succeed.

Another trigger that could explain my pursuit for control may be seen in my emotional condition. In the narrative describing the crisis project, one of these emotional drivers may have been my fear of failure. As a newcomer to the consulting business, I was anxious that I would be unable to secure a regular income. Shame may have been another emotional driver that could explain my focus on rational control methods. This is partially the feeling of guilt for being blamed for being unable to lead the project to success, and thus risking loss of recognition as a good project manager and expert consultant. Partially this is also the humiliation I feared from former colleagues, that if I failed as a consultant, this would confirm the hesitations that they expressed when I decided to leave a secure job to enter the risky consulting business. This emotional state made me eager to follow the promising propositions that project management theories promote, as if I wanted to believe in their ability to lead to success. This fear and shame may also be a source of anger, as another emotional driver, that I perceived when others did not comply with my methods in the way that I felt necessary to achieve a specific outcome, and thus prevented me from satisfying my need for recognition. This drove me to tighten the net of control mechanisms and eventually led to a vicious circle of control and resistance to control.

It is these kinds of emotions, mutually influencing my emotional state, that I perceive as particularly relevant in the context of project control. The purpose of this section is to understand the role of these feelings in the social exercise of control. I am not aiming to

provide an exhaustive review of the wider theory on the concept of emotion, including other feelings such as love, joy, jealousy and so on, and which certainly also affect my emotional condition, as I consider them to be less relevant as drivers for excessive control in project settings. Nevertheless, a short introduction to the subject, in more general terms, seems required before focusing on the more specific role of emotions in the exercise of project control.

The Concept of Emotion

In the tradition of scientific approaches, emotions are perceived to be the outcome of a process which is composed of several elements. The components of the emotional process are an external stimuli (1) triggering our perception (2), followed by a mental processing (3), conscious or unconscious, and resulting in bodily reactions (4). This conceptualisation of the emotional process is subject to many controversial discussions about the way these different components play together.

William James, an American philosopher and psychologist, and considered one of the leading thinkers of the late nineteenth century, puts, in his influential book "The Principles of Psychology" (James 1890), the focus on the bodily expression of emotion. The main assumption of his theory is that,

> *[…] bodily changes follow directly the perception of the existing fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion*
>
> *James (1890: 448e)*

James criticises the common-sense assumption that the perception of a trigger first excites an emotional state which then generates physiological reactions i.e. seeing a bear creates feelings of fear which then increases our heartbeat, making us run away. He argues that one mental state is not stimulated by another, and instead the bodily expression must be seen as the trigger for the emotions we are made to feel. He perceives the body as a 'sounding board' (ibid: 448e) which makes us conscious of what we feel, and without those reverberations of the body we would not be able to feel. From this perspective, what we feel when we see the bear is the bodily expression, without any mental evaluation taking place before the bodily experience:

> *If we fancy some strong emotions, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we, find that we have nothing left behind, no "mind-stuff" out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains.*
>
> *James (1890:451e)*

James therefore puts bodily feelings at the centre of the emotional process and as a result sees the generation of emotions as an innate and automatic mechanism with limited conscious choice for behavioural patterns.

Charles Darwin, in his book on "The expression of the emotions in man and animals" also takes on a biological/physiological perspective and defines emotions as the result of the evolutionary process. Similarly to James, he understands the generation of emotions as an innate and automatic mechanism triggering bodily reactions to maintain life, common to all men and animals (Darwin 1890)).

Damasio (1994), a neuroscientist and university professor researching the role of emotions in social cognition and decision processes, refers to "primary emotions" to denote this Darwinian "dispositions of survival" (ibid: 114). However, contrary to James, he sees emotions as the result of a mental experience subject to a linear order of events, i.e. an external stimuli (e.g. a threat) triggering an experience of emotion (e.g. feeling of fear) which leads to a specific behavioural pattern (e.g. fight/flight).

The difference to James' understanding of the emotional process lies in the inner meaning-making process which precedes the generation of bodily reactions. Both Darwin and Damasio see these bodily reactions as being the result of a mental process, a brain function, even though this survival mechanism is considered to be innate and automatic where a conscious evaluation does not take place.

However, Damasio (1994:127–133) challenges the suggestion that the processing of all emotions can be merely reduced to an instinctual biological reaction, as a basic and involuntary mechanism for taking decisions. He sees the difference between humans and other nonhuman species in our ability to become conscious of our emotional states. Damasio claims that we tend to mentally judge the relevance of an external trigger before taking specific actions and thus this reaction must be understood as the result of a conscious evaluation to an external trigger. Therefore, he defines "secondary emotions"

as an internal "evaluative, voluntary, nonautomatic mental process" (ibid: 130). It is this capacity to become aware of our feelings and be sensitive to social context which provide humans with a certain flexibility to choose a response (ibid: 133). Furthermore, Damasio argues that this response, in contrast to primary emotions, is grounded on the evaluation of "acquired" knowledge gained through past human interactions, rather than from innate mental models (ibid: 136). Damasio then defines the emotional process as follows:

> *emotion is the combination of a mental evaluative process, simple or complex, with dispositional responses to that process, mostly toward the body proper, resulting in an emotional body state*
>
> *Damasio 1994:139*

From this perspective, dealing with emotions in problematic situations, for example, in the fear of losing a parent, or the anxiety of losing control over a project, or when seeing someone crying, may thus be understood as a type of instinctive mechanism which must have led me to adopt similar patterns of reaction in the form of an over-rationalised approach. Although it may be tempting to use this explanation to explain why I adopted similar patterns of behaviour in different situations, I do not perceive these behaviours to be the same in any situation, even if they are of the same kind. The behaviour that I demonstrated when my father passed away was not the same as when I experienced the loss of my mother several years later. Or, seeing someone crying in a private context does not raise within me the same feelings as in a professional context, and thus does not necessarily lead to the same reaction. Or, one project is not another, and my reactions in the case of perceived failure vary depending on the context of the project. Although, I believe that there are some similarities in my behaviour when confronted with similar emotional situations, I do not think that these reaction patterns are always the same and believe that they depend on the context.

The explanation of the emotional process provided by James, Darwin and Damasio seems to be mainly focused on the individual, emphasising the inner meaning-making processing of emotions as a linear interplay between body and mind. These authors believe this emotional process is common to all humans and that it continuously influences our behaviours, albeit in a somehow unpredictable manner.

Control of Emotions

Emotions as Disruptive Behaviours

Still, most rational management theories based on a scientific world view, within which I include project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009), frequently reject emotions as being negative and dysfunctional, something that needs to be avoided and ignored. Some critical scholars have undertaken extensive research on this phenomenon and confirm the rather negative connotations of emotions in most scientific management theories.

Fineman & Sturdy (1999), two scholars researching the role of emotions in the context of organisational control, criticise the tendency in management practice to individualise and pathologise emotional behaviours, assigning them with the malicious traits of a few individual employees rather than viewing them as natural emotional patterns of behaviour in any individual (ibid: 634–635). Fineman (2004) concludes that this tendency especially targets painful emotions and perceives this 'de-situationalising' of emotions as problematic (ibid: 720).

Simpson & Marshall (2010), two scholars researching the interplay between emotion and organisational learning, conclude that cognitive theories pay little attention to the impact of emotion, regarding emotion as a mere constraint to efficient organisational functioning. They claim that emotion-sensitive theories (e.g. psychdynamics, which I will introduce later) still consider emotions to distort our cognitive abilities and therefore to be rather negative, associating the experience of failure with feelings such as 'shame, embarrassment, disappointment, and humiliation' (ibid:352).

Paradoxically, it seems that this idealistic quest for avoiding emotions finds its origins in just one such emotion, namely the feeling of anxiety which arises in the face of uncertainties in our daily work practice. In his research on managerial control, Streatfield (2001:7–8) concluded that we seem to avoid emotions at work, believing that 'if they are expressed they will open up a Pandora's box of not being in control'. It is this fear of not having things under control and the subsequent anxiety invoked by uncertainty which drives our pursuit for more control.

In the same way, Mintzberg (1994:202) refers to the 'illusion of control', understanding this pursuit for control through the application of rational tools as being a helpless

response to our fear of uncertainty, rather than an appropriate means for dealing with uncertainty itself.

I have been educated and trained in the same western scientific tradition and remember how often I have heard the words “let’s not get emotional’ throughout my career, as a reminder that we should adopt professional attitudes which have no place for emotions. In the project described in my previous narrative I used similar expressions, for example, “Are we in a kindergarten here?”, to denote a situation where the project team and the project manager endlessly quarrelled about problems which I perceived to be primarily relational rather than “real” project issues, resulting in behaviour that I considered childish, as if grown-ups should not have, or at least not show, emotions. I considered this behaviour to be inefficient and even counterproductive, and that it should certainly be repressed. When I saw the project manager sitting there nearly crying, I remember that I felt extremely uncomfortable because I did not really know how to deal with such an unusual situation. I was bewildered by this expression of strong emotion in the context of a business situation. Even in my personal life, I demonstrate similar emotion-avoiding behaviours when dealing with problems, as in the case with my father’s disease. In both my professional and my private life, I have adopted similar patterns of apparently emotionless behaviour when I strive to achieve a specific result, informed, as I now see, by assumptions of western scientific thinking, namely that emotions prevent efficient functioning and hinder the project manager in their role of control.

In contrast to this defensive scientific approach, researchers from psychodynamic and psychometric traditions, although sharing the same linear and individualist understanding of the emotion-generating process, perceive emotions as malleable objects that can be controlled in a way that yields better results. They do not simply ignore emotions but try to use them in their favour. I was first introduced to psychodynamic and psychometric theories in the Master of Change Management degree that I completed a few years back. I found the various concepts proposed in this master’s programme, using emotions to optimise results, quite seductive, as I imagined that I had finally found a solution to the problems I continuously experienced with the human factor in my projects. In the following section, I will explore how these theories are used to control emotions.

Control of Emotions from a Psychodynamic Perspective

Considering emotions as obstacles for achieving specific outcomes has led these theories to conclude that feelings cannot simply be ignored in organisational contexts and must be dealt with. Both theories take on different approaches but appear to me to have quite common characteristics, as I will explain later in this section.

First, I introduce psychodynamics by drawing on one of the professors from my master's degree to illustrate this school of thought. Leopold Vansina holds a PhD in psychology and is an emeritus professor at two Belgian universities, as well as a visiting professor at HEC University in Paris, where he taught organisational behaviour concerned mainly with social defence mechanisms.

Vansina & Vansina (2008) define psychodynamics as being grounded in psychoanalytic theory and practices, but still regard them as a distinct field of study (ibid: 108). Both approaches work with the notion of unconsciousness, but unlike psychoanalytic theories, they see psychodynamics as being less concerned with issues relating to 'individual, repressed infantile wishes', and more interested in 'what becomes repressed and suppressed under the influence of groups, social interactions and social defences embedded in work systems' (ibid: 109). The data of research is the observable behaviour made in such work systems, trying to detect hidden meanings, which Vansina sees expressed in defensive behaviours in the work place (ibid: 110). The psychodynamic school is thus concerned with the analysis of the "here and now", focusing on the tensions and fears which arise in these work systems and bringing them to awareness. In contrast to the psychoanalytic theories which he believes to be more concerned with the 'primitive anxieties of individuals' (ibid: 111–112), Vansina sees psychodynamic approaches 'as forms of inquiry' to analyse these hidden processes occurring in work systems and 'as ways of creating conditions' to find sustainable solutions to improve their functioning (ibid: 113–114).

From a psychodynamic perspective, social defence mechanisms are more or less unconscious reactions of groups of people to "uncontrollable dangers" in the form of feelings of fear, shame and guilt (ibid: 68). These social defences are expressed as procedures and structures, as 'ways of organising work and/or allocating responsibilities aimed at alleviating work-related tensions'. Once established, these procedures and structures often outlive the tensions which created their existence in the first place and tend to remain stable once socially embedded (ibid: 74). These

mechanisms aim to allow people and groups to operate effectively and are thus considered important for the effective functioning of groups (ibid: 80).

Vansina is building on Lyth Menzies, who he considers as one of the pioneers of social defence theories, accrediting her with the discovery that the primary task of an organisation may not be its only structuring criteria. In her empirical study (Menzies 1960) on the work organisation of nursing systems as a defence against distress resulting from work situations with patients, Menzies coined the term social defence mechanisms to denote an overemphasised adoption of rational methods in hospitals. She claims that these methods have the implicit aim of 'depersonalisation' in order to control feelings and thus be able to tolerate anxieties resulting from interpersonal emotional experiences (ibid:444–445). This theory may also apply to other, non-medical contexts, as shown by Hirschhorn (1990), a scholar describing psychodynamics processes within organisations. Hirschhorn's research on the effects of defence mechanisms has led him to use the term "organisational rituals" (ibid:67), viewing these rituals as a stable form of protection against anxieties originating from work situations, which develop self-sustaining tendencies making them difficult to dissolve.

Defensive mechanisms were also prevalent in my project. For example, the focus on the project plan may be perceived as an attempt to abstract the complexities of human interactions, reducing the project to its activities and deliverables and thus rationalising a social process. We can additionally observe the mechanical approach to setting up the project as a series of rational steps, which may be seen as a defence providing the certainty and safety that is supposedly required to be able to tackle such uncertain and anxiety-provoking undertakings that projects usually represent. At the beginning of the project, this overly-rationalised approach seemed to help, reassuring most people that we now knew what to do and how to proceed, thus providing an impression of control. This feeling seemed to release new motivation and led the board members, the team and the project manager to believe that they could now finally complete this project after having been stuck for so long. However, the effects of the depersonalisation that often comes along with those rational approaches could not be suppressed for long.

Moreover, in the same psychodynamic tradition, Menzies (1960) describes how patients make "psychological demands" on nurses (ibid: 442), projecting upon them their own feelings of anxiety, and even forcing responsibility for difficult decisions back onto the nurses. In my narrative, I could also be perceived as the emotional 'container' (Vansina 2008:59) for the other participants' anxieties, as I was the expert mastering the methods

required to deal with this situation. Although I was hired only as a coach, I felt that the board members and project manager expected me to make unpopular decisions on their behalf in order to progress the project. This became obvious later on when the project manager assigned responsibility to me for the problems we encountered with the team, insisting that he simply executed my decisions. It seemed as if they were forcing the responsibility back onto me, and all these expectations increased the pressure that I felt, amplifying my fears of failure and thus sustaining the vicious circle of defensive rationalisation.

Presenting the rational methods commonly used in project management as defence mechanisms rather than as mere control tools sheds new light on their ability to provide control over projects, and raises doubts about their glorified mission to solely serve the need of achieving the projected outcomes. Furthermore, it may provide some insight into why we try so hard to stick to these methods, knowing full well that they do not satisfy these rational expectations.

Another school of thought which aims to control emotions in order to achieve better outcomes is the psychometric approach.

Emotional intelligence - a psychometric view on control of emotions

These theories build upon the measurement of emotions, trying to transform 'psychological qualities into quantities' in order to identify statistical means which allow for the manipulation of these quantified emotions (Fineman 2004: 721).

Emotional intelligence is a representative strand of the psychometric tradition and focuses largely on the leader's emotional ability to deal with organisational problems. The term emotional intelligence has been predominately shaped by psychologist David Goleman in his book "The Power of Emotional Intelligence" (Goleman 2011). Goleman defines emotions as more or less automatic bodily reactions and considers them a necessary evil that must be controlled by leaders:

> *'Biological impulses drive our emotions. We cannot do away with them - but we can do much to manage them'*
>
> *Goleman 2011:30*

His research is largely concerned with measuring a leader's ability to deal with emotions, their own 'self-awareness' and 'self-management' (ibid: 28–34), and the emotions of others ('empathy' and 'social skills' (ibid: 34–39), and he ascribes an increased chance of becoming successful leaders to high performers in this domain. In his research, Goleman identifies six leadership styles: coercive, visionary, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting, coaching (ibid:60), each the product of a mix of emotional components. He recommends using theses styles much like a golf player uses various clubs for specific purposes (ibid:41), and attributes these styles with a significant impact on the organisation's performance.

Goleman's theory focuses on using bodily expressions of emotion to trace the body's reactions back to its emotional roots, assuming it is possible to control this process. It is based on the same linear assumption as organisational theories influenced by the psychodynamic school of thought, and has a similar objective, i.e. to manipulate other people's emotions in order to better achieve organisational goals.

In their own studies, Fineman & Sturdy (1999:635) identify such tendencies of 'melding of emotions and control', blaming psychodynamic and psychometric theories for fostering and exploiting feelings of distress, using rewarding and sanctioning techniques which build upon John Watson's (1970) theory on praise and punishment (cf. 'behaviourism' in research project 2). However, they consider such a view on emotion to be rather limited and not aligned with the diverse nature of social relations.

Other emotion controlling theories

Other change management theories also rely on similar concepts to use the full emotional potential of people to keep them motivated, for example, based on Kotter's techniques of persuasion, involvement and motivation (Kotter 1996; see project 2). I used such techniques in the crisis project: I defined clear objectives and structures to provide my customer with a sense of security and stability and thus reduce anxiety, and I organised planning workshops to make people feel part of the team. The team building exercise was designed to foster feelings of belonging and togetherness, and to empower the team by delegating responsibilities and increase their motivation. All these intentional measures were aimed at regulating emotions, by reducing negative emotions which could supposedly hinder efficiency. Obviously, as demonstrated by the results documented in my narrative, these purposeful and outcome-oriented measures did not

lead to the level of control that I expected, and the intended project results could not be achieved as planned either.

Critic to a Cognitive Understanding of Emotions

This understanding of emotions, as well as the techniques to identify, measure and control them, either by dealing with them through creating efficient conditions or by using them intentionally to achieve own goals, seems to be based on similar basic assumptions. It is assumed that managers or consultants can step outside of a work system as external observers, analyse what is going on and apply rational solutions. If people do not respond to the intended change in the expected way, it is assumed that they are influenced by negative emotions that must be controlled. These assumptions are the same as the ones underlying systems thinking, as described in my second research project (Chapter: Process vs Systems Thinking based on Stacey 2011).

Furthermore, Ian Burkitt (2014), a professor of sociology and social psychology with a research interest in the social and psychological understanding of feelings and emotions, criticises traditional theories for being largely based on a linear and individualistic understanding of emotions. He believes that they tend to see emotions as an object, considering bodily expressions of emotion as evidence that they must exist in our mind. From this view, these emotion-driven behaviours should be seen as a linear result of mental processing which takes place in our body-brain system. Mind is then considered to be a simple processor of emotions embedding cognitive predispositions for certain emotional responses. This individualist interpretation of the emotional process assumes innate or individually learned reaction patterns which are then applied in a somehow instinctive way (ibid: 1–5).

Applying this linear and individualistic thinking to the emotional situation that I experienced with the project manager could lead to the conclusion that his emotional expression, i.e. being slumped in his chair with a pale face and tears in his eyes, must have been the result of a feeling of anxiety inside of him, triggered by the act of exclusion that he experienced from the project team, as a kind of habitual behaviour that he would also demonstrate in other situations of a similar kind, as an individually learned behaviour. In the same way, the rational behavioural pattern that I demonstrated in the situation with my father might be seen, from this individualist interpretation, as a pattern that I typically demonstrate in such situations. This view suggests that the

emotion is somehow located in the individual, waiting to be activated by a specific trigger and resulting in a bodily expression of a certain pre-defined pattern.

Burkitt believes that this interpretation of the emotional process 'ignores patterns of relationship[s]' (ibid: 2). Although traditional theories commonly agree that emotions are a means of communication, it is still widely acknowledged that emotions are generated internally and independently from external influences (Damasio 1994:130). Thus, individualistic interpretations of the emotional process do not really consider social influences. However, Burkitt claims that by expressing emotions we are relating to others, and thus considers this expression as a fundamentally social process. This does not preclude that body and mind are part of this process, but it cannot be limited to just a bodily processing, as he believes that our feelings must be connected to the outside world (ibid: 2).

This social view on emotions might lead to other interpretations of my experience with the project manager. Rather than seeing his emotional reaction as the simple result of a single trigger, it can be interpreted as the result of a more long-term pattern in the relationship between the project manager and the team, of which he was a part for a long time before being promoted to project manager, dramatically and instantly changing their relationship. I now no longer regard the way I dealt with my father's disease as an automatic reaction pattern that I always demonstrate in such stressful situations, but rather understand that my actions are also driven by other, less obvious influences, based on my historical relationship with my father and others in my family.

Controlling emotions from such a social perspective may then be less obvious, as I will try to outline in the following sections.

Emotions and Control - a Complex Social Process

In the previous section I wrote about theories claiming to be able to control emotions based on a linear and individualistic understanding of the concept of emotion. At this stage in my research I am starting to regard emotions as a more complex and social process, and I would like to present another view on the emotion-generating process and its implications on the concept of control.

Emotions - a Complex Process

Norbert Elias, whose ideas on process thinking were already presented in my second research project, considers, in his process-sociological study on humans and their emotions (Elias 1987a), that the repression of emotions often practiced in rational theories is unrealistic. He does not recognise anything dysfunctional in emotions, but rather perceives them as an essential element of any human interaction, even ascribing important functions to them for the evolution of whole societies:

> *[…] emotions and the related movements have a function within the context of a person's relationship with other persons and in a wider sense with nature at large. Emotions and the related movements or 'expressions' are, in short, one of the indications that human beings are by nature constituted for life in the company of others, for life in society.*
>
> *Elias 1987a:361*

Elias (1987a) claims that no emotion 'is ever an entirely unlearned, genetically fixated reaction pattern' (ibid: 352) and thus emotions are not, as still widely assumed in many contemporary management sciences, physically located, within the individual since birth. He challenges the idea that an expression of emotion, be it a facial expression or a behaviour, is the linear result of an internalised emotion, and he rejects the assumption that these expressions can give evidence of the real feelings harboured by individuals. At the same time, although realist theories give a relevant importance to emotional expressions as identifiers of emotions, he believes that, by doing so, these theories are reducing this expression to a mere effect of the emotion itself and thus are somehow ignoring the important function that the emotional expressions play in human communication:

> *The chargeable balance between emotional impulses and emotion-controlling counter-impulses shows itself in a person's movements, in their gestures and in their facial expressions which are signals by means of which people communicate involuntarily or with intent the condition of the self-regulation of their emotions to other human beings. The term expression obscures the social, the communicative function of facial and other movements.*
>
> *Elias 1987a:360*

Dewey (1896a), an American philosopher and one of the primary figures of pragmatism, in his second article on 'The Theory on Emotions', criticises the scientific explanation of the emotion-generating process for 'denying the very existence of emotion, reducing it to mere consciousness of bodily change as such' (ibid:16). He firmly rejects this distinction between stimulus and emotional response. Contrary to the realist's understanding of emotions, Dewey believes that emotional responses are not simply triggered by a pre-existing emotion (ibid:13), but rather the interpretation of the stimulus, i.e. the 'idea' of it, the expression of emotion and the feeling of it, are constituent parts of the same 'concrete whole experience' of emotion (ibid:15–16); for him it is important to understand that these components are part of the same process and cannot be isolated or simply related by linear causality:

'no such seriality or separation attaches to the emotion as an experience'

ibid:18

Dewey considers the components of the emotional process to be generated at the same time and therefore 'represent the tension of stimulus and response within the coordination which makes up the mode of behavior' (ibid:18–19). It is in this coordination where stimulus and response 'are in operation together' and 'reinforce each other' out of which emotions emerge (ibid:26).

Both Dewey and Elias reject the essentialist and dualistic assumptions underlying theories with a linear and individualistic understanding of the emotional process, claiming that they promote a separation between thinking and feeling. They rather understand cognition and emotion to be part of the same process, inseparably related and mutually conditioning each other in various ways, and thus perceiving this single process as nonlinear and untraceable.

The views expressed by Elias and Dewey lead me to rethink my reaction in front of the project manager. When I saw him in his desolate emotional condition, I immediately concluded that he must be facing a severe problem. To me, his crying represented a very intense emotional reaction that I would not have expected in a professional context, as I considered such a reaction to be highly unprofessional. Therefore, my initial reaction was to assume that his condition must be related to a personal problem, especially as, just before entering his office, one of the board members had told me that everything was fine. My socially constructed understanding of the act of crying influenced my

interpretation of his behaviour, relating it back to a very intense feeling of sadness, for example, the loss of a beloved or similar dramatic experience. When he recounted why he felt so miserable, I felt embarrassed for him, again showing the influence of my own social background in the interpretation of this situation, i.e. believing that if I had expressed such a personal reaction as a project manager this would only highlight my weakness and confirm an inability to cope with difficult situations, in turn arising my own feelings of shame and guilt. My reaction was then one of staying silent, a gesture that he may have interpreted as a lack of concern for him, or even an attempt to avoid sharing responsibility for this situation. This may, in turn, have caused him to become angry and hostile, blaming me for being a part of the problem. When reflecting upon this situation with Elias' and Dewey's understanding of the emotional process in mind, I start to grasp the complex nature of this process, where my interpretation of the situations and reactions were not simply linear and automatic patterns of behaviour, but also driven by the situational context and by socially shaped past experiences.

Burkitt (2014) sees this emotional process as a whole experience of tightly interwoven emotional components firmly integrated into human reasoning, resulting in uncontrollable human behaviours and thus pointing to the essentially complex character of this whole process (ibid: 14). He believes that this complex process is not automatic, even though it may be partially unconscious, and claims that it is not simply a 'cognitive learned style of thinking' that we have individually experienced over time (Burkitt 2014:5). Rather, he sees emotions as the outcome of a 'moral evaluation' that we apply to other's people behaviour (ibid: 5), interpreting this behaviour in ways that are 'socially and culturally meaningful' and expressing our interests and aspirations (ibid:65). It is through this complex act of meaning-making that emotions emerge. He does not see this act of meaning-making as an isolated one, but always occurring as the coordination of 'larger patterns of actions that not only have present conditions but also an end point, alongside conditions that people bring from past experience' (ibid:58).

This complexity is further emphasised by the flexibility of the emotional response. Although Burkitt agrees that we have a certain disposition to act according to our feelings, he does not agree with the more traditional theories on emotions, that this disposition equals an 'determination to act', pointing to a linear correlation between our emotions and our reactions (ibid:16). He rather understands this disposition as a 'tendency to act in particular ways', as habitual patterns dependent on the social context, themselves being 'sedimentations of past patterns of relationships' which must adapt to

the situations we are confronted with and where we bring our own biographies to life in the emotional response (ibid:7). Such an understanding of our emotional reactions makes sense in that it explains why I often show similar patterns of reaction when faced with anxieties resulting from uncertain situations. These habitual patterns are noticeable in various professional and personal situations I have experienced, in the form of an over-rationalisation of the situation. Still, these reactions are not always identical, but rather differ in relation to the situational context. For example, witnessing an act of crying in a situation where I feel less responsible or see less risk of being blamed for the consequences of the problem may evoke a reaction from me that is different from simply staying silent and being more concerned with my owns feelings of shame and guilt, and being rendered unable to engage with my counterpart.

From this perspective, the complexity of emotions and the problems that result from trying to control them is tightly related to the inherently social dimension of the processing of emotions, a dimension which I will explore in more detail in the next section.

A Social Understanding of Emotions

In their research on the effects of emotion on the learning process, Simpson & Marshall (2010:354) conclude that emotions and learning are "mutually conditioning elements of an unfolding flow of experience" and that acknowledging the social nature of their relationship may lead to new insights in theorising both concepts.

They draw on Mead's communication theory (cf. research project 2) to present emotions as emerging from the act of gesturing and responding, out of the 'relationship between the intended meaning of a gesture and the perceived meaning of the response it engenders', and as such as the result of differences in interpretation in the communication process. Thus, an emotion is not simply a bodily experience, resulting from a linear trigger-reaction causality, but rather 'acts as [a] communicative gesture', emerging from ongoing social interactions rather than being the result of individual mental processing (ibid: 357).

In their study on the relationship between emotion and organisational learning, Simpson & Marshall use definitions for specific feelings that allow for these emotions to be characterised in 'distinctively social and dynamic terms' (ibid: 357). For the purpose of this research project, I will use these definitions and apply them to feelings that I

consider relevant for explaining the relationship between emotions and control, namely anxiety, guilt and hostility (which I relate to anger).

Anxiety is defined as an emotion which emerges when our interpretation of a situation cannot be mapped to our own experience, and so the 'personal experience has not equipped the construer to adequately interpret events' (ibid 357). The experience of uncertainty is then considered to be at the source of our anxiety (ibid 306–361). In my narrative, anxiety was expressed in my fear of failure. I was anxious in a situation that was new to me as a newcomer in the consulting business. I had been called by a customer to fix a crisis project that has been running for two years without showing any results. Finding myself in an unfamiliar environment, not knowing anyone, and being confronted with high expectations in my capacity to fix the problem put considerable pressure on me. Having previously worked for many years in the same company, I was used to conducting projects in a familiar social context, having a solid network of people that I could build upon, and mastering projects of a similar nature. Here, I was confronted with a new social environment, and I felt that everyone expected me to know exactly what needed to be done. I felt lost in this social context, not really knowing where to start. This feeling of uncertainty prompted my own fear of failure and led me to adopt a rational textbook approach. Such an approach provided me with a sense of security which alleviated my feelings of distress in the face of such an unusual and unfamiliar situation.

Another emotion described in social terms in the study of Simpson & Marshall is the feeling of guilt. They define guilt as when a social event triggers a person to question his 'core sense of himself', compelling him to feel the necessity for a radical personal change in order to restore the integrity of his identity. The feeling of 'being obliged to act out of character' (ibid: 360–361) so as to meet other people's expectations is also what triggered my own guilt when I was blamed by the project manager for being a part of the problem that he had experienced with the team. I felt that I had failed, prompting me to challenge my capacity to lead projects to success and thus my identity as a project manager. I reacted by withdrawing from the conversation and reinforcing my technical approach to restore the project. Perhaps the project manager's reaction of accusing me was his way of dealing with his own feelings of guilt, of feeling excluded by the team, doubting his own performance, and feeling his position challenged in a team that he formerly was part of.

Another feeling that I identified as relevant in my quest for control in projects, is anger. Simpson & Marshall refer to 'hostility' (ibid: 357) to denote a situation where we are

unable, or unwilling, to change our view of a situation despite obvious signs of resistance from others. In such situations, people tend to deny any fallacies in their own constructions of what is going on. This behaviour can also be perceived when I blamed the project team for not sticking to the project manager's plan, even assuming malicious behaviours, and did not attempt to understand the motivation behind their reaction. Instead, I recommended tightening the web of control by conducting daily project meetings. Perhaps the project manager himself was unable to challenge his own way of dealing with the team when facing their colluded resistance against his continuous intervention, resulting in a vicious circle of control and resistance to control.

These examples show emotions as social acts that should not be considered as isolated gestures, but rather as part of the larger context of social relations happening in the present, influenced by our past in the form of historical social experiences, and affected by the future in the form of our own interests and aspirations that we try to impose on others. If then, as demonstrated in the previous section, these social acts are understood as whole experiences, where socially constructed emotions and rational thinking are seen to be part of one and the same nonlinear process mutually influencing each other, it becomes evident that the exercise of control is essentially a complex social process.

What does all this mean for control?

Conclusion - Emotions of Control

Perceiving emotions as being linear and individualist seems to invite the notion that emotions should be controlled. However, when taking a complex and social perspective, then the attempt to control emotions seems rather desperate, as the act of controlling, in itself, is a result of our emotions.

Buytendijk eloquently expresses this relationship of control and emotion:

> *"being emotional" or becoming emotional always exists in the experience of being out of control, of being taken over by the situation'*
>
> *Burkitt 2014:17 citing F.J. Buytendijk (1974)*

In a similar way, Fineman and Sturdy, in their study on control and emotions (Fineman & Sturdy 1999), refer to "emotions of control" (ibid: 632) to underline this inseparable relationship, where control is considered as an emotional response in a specific social context. The controlling measures that I had put in place to monitor the treatment of my father, knowing full well that this would not stop his disease from progressing, were predominantly an emotional response to my own anxieties. They use this term to contrast it with what is usually referred to in traditional management theories as "control of emotions", which is based on a very different understanding and builds on assumptions of linear and individual processing, as extensively described above. Instead, Fineman & Sturdy propose regarding control as a 'dynamic and psychosocial process' (ibid: 636) and claim that 'the emotional texture of control is an essential condition and outcome of apparent agreements and personal commitments' (ibid:651).

From this, I conclude that emotion and control are inseparably related. De-emotionalising control, as often proposed by contemporary management theories, either through ignoring emotions and applying rationalised strategies, or by dealing with emotions so as to keep them under control or turning them into positive effects, seems unfeasible under the assumption that both control and emotions are part of the same social and complex process, as outlined in the previous sections.

Maintaining complete control over such a social and complex process is surely not possible. This does not, however, mean that we are completely out of control. Burkitt (2014) concludes from his research that control over emotions depends on the intensity of the situation, our own propensity to deal with it, and how much we are affected by it, and that this, in turn, determines the 'range of control' from being 'helplessly affected to being very much in control' (ibid: 16). How the range of control varies with affection can easily be seen in my interaction with the project manager, where I felt embarrassed to witness him crying, but was still under the impression of being in control, as I felt not affected by "his" problem with the team. At the same time, I felt anxious about how others could perceive my involvement as a coach, which thus raised my affection to the situation, which, in turn, resulted in a feeling of not being in control.

The use of rational tools and techniques to control the achievement of outcomes is thus a rather limited view, ignoring the effects of power and emotions which take part in any act of control. Burkitt (2014: 150) sees emotion relations and power relations as tightly related and inseparable from rational evaluation and judgment. Thus, any act of control is a powerful and emotion-driven social gesture, as one and the same process. I now

understand control as a much subtler concept, no more taking on a dualist "either … or" assumption of being alternatively in control or not in control, but rather perceiving control as continuously shifting in power-laden and emotion-driven social acts by mutually conditioning actors, and thus providing a sensation of being simultaneously in control and out of control.

Outlook to Research Project 4

In my first research project, a reflective autobiography, I mentioned that I have been educated in a western scientific tradition and have taken for granted that my world is composed of realities that just need to be discovered. I wrote how I was immersed in a universe of dualistic thinking, neatly teasing apart my realities in simple "either…or"-dimensions, always trying to do the right thing, and to do it correctly. I further wrote how I was attracted to project management theories as I believed that they provided me with the control I required to lead my projects to success.

In my second research project, I began to challenge how we define project results in project management: either as a success or as a failure. To illustrate my increasing doubts about such a simple categorisation of project results, in my narrative I described a project that had been perceived as a success by some and a failure by others. I concluded that project results are unpredictably predictable, and that success is a socially shaped concept and thus a moving target. These reflections on project success and failure were my first point of contact with a more complex definition of my world view, challenging the strict "black and white" classification and opening up to a more complex "both… and" thinking,

In my third research project, described above, I continued in my quest for a better understanding of the complexities that I perceived in my daily practice and challenged the "total control"-paradigm underlying project management theories. For this purpose, I used a narrative describing a crisis project which I took over as a project coach and where I had the feeling of being simultaneously both in control and not in control. I wondered how this could be possible and defined control as a power-laden and emotion-driven complex social process, where people continuously and mutually constrain and enable themselves, thus resulting in a continuous shifting range of control.

Today I start to see the world in more complex terms, viewing projects as predictably unpredictable and simultaneously controllable and uncontrollable. I consider these paradoxical relationships, where two opposing forces mutually condition each other, resulting in a continuously shifting complex interaction, to make more sense for explaining what I live through in my daily practice. Therefore, in my next research project, I will draw further upon such conflicting tendencies in project management to illustrate the paradoxical nature of daily project work.

2. Research Projects

Research Project 4

Project Management - a Methodology Ruling Practice?

Introduction

In this fourth research project I had originally planned to reflect upon a typical and relentlessly recurring conflict in project management. This conflict relates to a leadership dilemma regularly discussed and disputed among project management circles, about how 'hands on' or 'hands off' project leaders should be with their projects. The resulting responses generally sit somewhere between two extremes, ranging from a deeply involved micro-management method to a very detached laissez-faire approach.

For this purpose, I chose a recent experience where this discussion had again cropped up. In this narrative, I describe how I invited my client to favour an engaged and participative leadership style over the more detached style that he seemed to prefer. Based on many years of project management experience, I had come to the conclusion that project leaders must have their hands on the projects they lead.

In the first review of my work, my DMan learning set found that my narrative, as well as my initial attempts to make sense of it, provided a rather abstract account of what I do. They wondered how, as a project management consultant, I could take such a single-sided perspective and favour one specific leadership style. They also wondered about my seemingly methodical, prescriptive and detached interventions, which were so in contrast with my previous conclusion that projects are never fully predictable nor controllable. I understood their bewilderment to be related to my reliance on methods and tools, but also to my attitude, as I pretended to know what to do and how to do it, and appeared to impose my preferred way of working on my customer and not take their practice seriously.

I was struck by their comments. For someone who perceives himself both to engage with his clients and adapt to the various circumstances encountered, I was upset that I appeared to intervene in a detached and determined manner. My first reaction was to feel misunderstood, and I concluded that I needed to describe what I do in more detail in order to demonstrate how I immerse myself in the practice of my clients and negotiate the various ways of proceeding together. It later occurred to me, however that these more detailed descriptions simply reproduced the synthetic prescriptions of the various project management handbooks.

This difficulty in describing what I do when engaging with my customers led me to think about what I actually do when working with them. I noticed that I always do the same, using similar approaches and the same tools, but in very different ways depending on the specific circumstances. I also realised that I am not able to say what is so unique about how I am practising, nor how I come to use these methods, techniques and tools in different ways. Nor am I able to explain how I come to agree with my customer on a way forward (in the sense of moving on, even though it is not necessarily in a preplanned way). Perhaps this explains why trying to give a clear account of my practice is so difficult.

These doubts drove me to change the focus of my research in this project. Whilst I still use the same narrative, I try to make sense of my practice in the context of my clients' environment, in order to understand what it means to be engaged in the projects which I consult. The following narrative typically illustrates my practice and the problems that I encounter.

Narrative

Background

One of my customers, TheSoftwareCompany (TSC), a worldwide provider of financial IT solutions, was in contract negotiations with a major European Financial Institution (EFI) for the implementation of a core financial system. EFI's CIO made the signing of this contract dependent on the implementation of an agile methodology[3]. This was due to this methodology's emphasis on user needs and its reputation in the project management world for providing better business value (Sutherland 2012; Sutherland & Schwaber 2016)[4]. TSC had little experience with agile methodologies and therefore asked

[3] Agile Software Development is an umbrella term for a set of methods and practices based on the values and principles expressed in the Agile Manifesto (Agile Alliance 2001), the root source of all agile methods. From this perspective, solutions are considered to evolve through an iterative and evolutionary approach, through collaboration between self-organizing, cross-functional teams utilising the appropriate practices for their context. 'What is Agile Software Development?' https:// /agile101/. Retrieved 07 Jan 2017)

[4] Dr. Jeff Sutherland and Ken Schwaber are the inventors of the Scrum software development process, a widely used agile software development process in project management. They are two of the 17 initial signatories of the Agile Manifesto).

me, as their project management consultant, to help them design a project approach that would meet EFI's requirements and thus secure the signing of this substantial contract.

I was reluctant to take on the job as I was fully occupied with TSC and the writing of my doctoral thesis. However, my sponsor at TSC persisted and eventually I gave in. Based on the input from TSC's project manager, I prepared some slides for a presentation to EFI's management. These slides demonstrated a project approach with some typical agile elements such as an iterative development phase, and a project organisation with several co-located teams to foster collaboration, emphasising user integration and reinforcing team empowerment and responsibility-taking.

Following my presentation, EFI's project sponsor approved the approach, but insisted that I should help his team to implement it. We agreed that I should visit the project team once a week to follow up on the application of the agreed measures.

The EFI Project

The project was intended to replace the core financial system used by half of EFI's workforce. It was planned to run over a period of 18 months with an expected total work effort of roughly 12,000 person-days and involved more than one hundred employees from EFI and TSC.

The main challenges of this project were: the redesign of EFI's business workflows and their correct translation into TSC's software product, the integration of this new IT system into the existing IT landscape of EFI which had more than 30 interfaces to other IT systems, and the migration of millions of data records from their former system that had been decommissioned. All of this needed to be designed, developed, configured, tested, documented and installed. On top of this, several hundred future users needed to be trained and prepared for this significant change.

For EFI, this project was by far their biggest undertaking in the last 15 years. There was a lot at stake for EFI's management and I guessed that this was the reason for requesting a solid and renowned project management approach. This project was also a substantial contract for TSC, and I felt significant pressure to succeed.

Initiating the Project

One of my first actions was to validate my consulting approach with Paul, EFI's project manager. He had been very positive about the method I presented two weeks earlier and demanded to do anything I deemed necessary for its successful implementation.

I started by splitting the project into several sub-projects with dedicated team leaders. I predicted that such a project structure would be more convenient for a project of this size as it allowed for the delegation of project responsibilities across the team. We discussed this structure at length and identified new team leaders for each box of the organisation. We then defined key deliverables that each of the newly assigned team leaders would be accountable for. Paul did not express any discontent with my proposal to distribute the responsibility for the project among the team leaders; on the contrary, he seemed relieved.

The following week, Paul and I ran several workshops with the newly assigned team leaders to explain and discuss the overall project approach. These discussions became quite heated as the proposed measures were not always easy to align with their current practice.

One of these workshop discussions was initiated by Pierre, the team leader responsible for the product configuration. He challenged the biweekly delivery frequency for testing the system features by the end-users, an approach dictated by the methodology based on the principle of evolutionary solution design. He perceived this frequency to be much too aggressive. I explained the rationale behind this, emphasising its importance for securing an adequate translation of user requirements, and reminded them that this iterative approach was one of the corner stones of agile projects. Some of his colleagues joined the discussion and claimed that the high frequency would put too much pressure on the teams. I could imagine that this high throughput may appear ambitious to those with no experience with this method, but I was worried that if this was not adequately implemented, the progressive design effect may be lost. After some further arguing, we concluded that monthly deliveries would be fine, but once this approach proved to work out for them, we may increase the delivery frequency again.

Another topic heavily challenged was the concept of team colocation, raised by Sarah, the new leader of the data migration sub-project. She expressed strong concerns about moving people around, arguing that this would not be efficient. I noticed how she

glanced over to Pierre when making her final point. Pierre's team was the most affected by my request for colocation. He seemed surprised by Sarah's covert invitation to support her and it took him a while to hesitantly confirm: "This is not what we normally do in our projects". Sarah quickly interrupted him, stating that my request was simply impossible to implement as people did not want to be moved around just for a project. I was not sure if she was speaking for her colleagues or out of her own reluctance to move office. I persisted, explaining again the rationale of this measure by pointing to the communication efficiency and its relevance for the iteration frequency previously discussed. Sarah persisted by arguing: "We tried this for other projects but it simply does not work at EFI; people do not want to leave their functional teams". Other team leaders nodded their heads in agreement with her. I realised that I had stirred up a hornet's nest. I looked at Paul, but he did not seem to see the need to intervene and help me. I dropped my request, but did insist that each team set up daily status meetings and secure co-located design workshops. They accepted these conditions and I noticed Sarah's smug smile to Pierre. I was unhappy with this compromise. For the moment they had won, but I was not yet ready to give up my request so easily.

Negotiations continued on all of the topics, taking up much more time than I had anticipated. I was concerned that we would not find the time to discuss their responsibilities as team leaders, a topic which I believed was very important for the project to succeed. I therefore asked Paul to organise a project kick-off meeting for the week after the final workshop, both to summarise the agreed results and, most importantly, to confirm their responsibilities. I was not able to join this meeting as I had other engagements that week, but I did not want to wait until my return in a fortnight to get all of this nailed down.

When I left them to get back to Luxembourg that week, I was satisfied with what I had achieved. The discussions were not easy but I had still found them constructive. Not everything was running perfectly and there was still a lot to do, but I felt optimistic as I considered that my advice had been broadly accepted. I also felt recognised. I was immersed in my practice, busy meeting people and organising and coordinating all day long. This way of initiating projects has, over the years, become second nature to me and I felt in my element.

The Breakdown

Not long after these workshops, I noticed that the implementation of the measures was lagging behind. I additionally sensed that the team leaders had started to avoid me during my weekly visits. Either they did not show up for the team-leader meetings that I had arranged with them, stating various excuses for their absence, or they came unprepared, unable to provide a decent status of their sub-projects and, most importantly, having implemented the agreed measures only half-heartedly.

One of these one-to-one meetings was with Martha, a veteran from EFI's IT department and responsible for securing the technical integration of the new system.

We started the meeting with some polite exchanges. I gently invited her to explain how she perceived the status of her sub-project and her role in all this. She paused a while and then stated that she had seen some 'revolutionary' new methods passing by since she worked at EFI. She simulated quotes with her fingers when saying this. I guessed she wanted to emphasise that she found those methods all but revolutionary. She continued by claiming that in the end, they always came back to their own way of doing things.

I found her answer strange, even a bit menacing. I put it down to the way that Paul had introduced me to the team, namely as an agile expert here to implement an agile methodology. I did not like this way of presenting my intervention at all and it was not what I had agreed with him. Furthermore, I did not want to appear as if I were just implementing a specific method. I was disappointed that the efforts I had made in the workshops to find compromises were obviously not recognised.

I guessed that Martha did not known about my arrangement with Paul. However, I preferred to avoid a discussion about my own role in all this and instead tried to redirect the conversation to how she understood her role in this project. She responded that the whole team had been informed in the project kick-off meeting about the overall project organisation and about what the scope of each sub-project was. She paused again, as if this were sufficient to answer my question. I felt frustrated by how she seemed to be avoiding my questions and I asked with a more determined undertone in my voice if this meant that she now finally understood her role. To my surprise, she said: "I do not think so". I was confused. Obviously Paul had done the project kick-off meeting that I recommended him to do, presenting the roles of team leaders and their responsibilities. So, why was this still not clear to her? Martha noticed my confusion and said that when

she later talked to the other team leaders, quite a few questions were raised about who was supposed to do what.

I was not really surprised that people had various interpretations of what was discussed in the kick-off meeting. In my experience, human communication is never as straightforward as we would like it to be. I was more intrigued by her defensive manner. Was it about me? We had met before in the workshops. The only thing I could remember about her was that she did not really speak up during these workshops. I could not imagine this to be a personal thing. Maybe it was the constellation of this one-to-one meeting suggesting to her a formal reporting relationship between us? But this explanation did not make sense to me either. I had chosen the cafeteria as a location for this meeting just to avoid making it appear as a formal reporting situation. When we came down together, we grabbed a cup of coffee and had a polite conversation about the design of the cafeteria before sitting at one of the tables. I just wanted to have a discussion between peer project managers and tried to make this setting as informal as possible. Thus, our short common history gave me no hints into how to make sense of her behaviour in this meeting. All this made me feel increasingly irritated.

I tried to control my rising temper and continued by asking her if they had tried to clarify this issue within the team or with Paul. She shook her head and when I asked why, she simply shrugged her shoulders. I fell silent too. I was not sure how to break this pattern. Of course, I could simply address my concerns about her evasive answers, but I was not sure if that would be a good strategy. Perhaps I just did not want to give her the opportunity to challenge my role in all this? I preferred to keep the discussion focused on what I considered to be the real problem, namely, how she perceived her responsibilities as a team leader.

I tried another tactic and asked her how she saw the measures proposed in the kick-off. She hesitated, but then straightened up in her seat and said that people at EFI were not used to being held responsible and that things did not work like that in this company.

At that moment, I started to realise that this might be her real concern and wondered if it was the explanation for the behaviour of the other team leaders too. She confirmed my thoughts by further stating that they all considered it risky to be made responsible for anything in this company, especially as EFI's management was running an efficiency programme for the past two years. Somehow, I felt relieved about this explanation as she finally seemed to reveal what was bothering her. But, I was still concerned by their

overall tendency to avoid responsibility. Such behaviour was simply impossible to align with my concept of project leadership. Previous experience had shown how, independent of the methods used, it is the engagement and commitment of people that makes the difference in projects. Although I could understand that they did not want to be blamed if the project were not perceived as successful, I was convinced that their reluctance for taking on responsibility and thus simply working to the rule would result in failure.

When I directly addressed this as a deficiency which needed to be fixed, she looked quite upset. She replied harshly that if I meant by this that she could be blamed in the case of non-delivery, then she did not want to be a team leader. I explained that I was more interested in seeing people feel responsible for what they did, and that blame was the last thing that came to my mind when talking about responsibility. However, I had to admit that was also what it meant. She claimed, staring at me, that she could not be made accountable for the problems caused by others and that she was just coordinating some deliverables of the IT department, and that it would be their problem if they could not deliver. She strengthened her argument by adding that this is how they had worked at EFI for years.

I felt that the discussion was stuck. Neither of us was ready to concede. We had goaded each other into taking strong positions, both believing we were right. I felt frustrated to a point that made it impossible for me to abstract from my own assumptions and take on anyone else's perspective.

I felt obliged to change to a less controversial topic and discussed the scope of her sub-project. The meeting went on for a few more minutes in a quite detached manner from both sides, when, eventually, to my relief, Martha had to leave for a subsequent meeting.

Some Reflections on my Way Back Home

When driving back home to Luxembourg that day, I felt bad about the meeting. I wondered how it could have taken such a turn and questioned my role in this. I blamed myself for not having sensed earlier what was going on for Martha and her colleagues and wondered why I had so relentlessly tried to make them adopt a project approach that I knew was problematic in their organisational context. Maybe I had rushed through this project too quickly, trying to get it finished so that I could move on. With hindsight, I felt that I should have done things differently and shown more understanding for their

situation and placed less emphasis on what I believed was required, even though I felt that I could justify my concerns by relying on many years of expertise in project management. I wondered why I had not been able to show a similar attitude in the heat of the moment.

I felt the whole project was stuck and was aware that if we did not change something in our way of working together, our cooperation might be jeopardised. I was beginning to doubt if I could help them in any significant way.

I needed to talk to Paul about all this the following week …

Practice - a Concept Difficult to Grasp

> *'Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to remind ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself.)'*
>
> *Wittgenstein (1968:42e)*

While writing the narrative, I noticed how difficult it was to provide a concrete account of what I actually do in my practice. I made several attempts to give the most factual description of what I "really" do, but always ended up reproducing the jargon of the various project management theories, using terms such as "setting up the project organisation and governance structures", "managing stakeholders", "defining roles and responsibilities" and many more. Presented in this way, my practice appears to resemble a simple translation of theory using terms that everyone is supposed to make the same sense of, something that can be known prior to practice and merely needs to be applied.

Actually, such abstract descriptions did not really show what we did while running this project. We did much more than simply applying methods and tools. But, it seemed that even though I was considered an expert in my profession, and therefore supposed to know what I do, I was clearly unable to identify what it was we were doing together. I wondered why this is so and if others also experience this phenomenon.

Chia & McKay (2007:219), two organisational management researchers interested in how organisational strategies emerge in practice, identified a 'basic lack of clarity' about what our practice is and noted that attempts to document practice often result in a mere account of what single participants do. According to Gherardi (2009:116), a professor in sociology, this is due to the relationship between practice and knowledge, as practice does not show itself easily to observers due to its hidden and tacit character. For Gherardi, practice is a 'knowledgeable collective action' (ibid:117) and the reason for not being able to articulate our practice is that 'we just know more than we can tell' (ibid: 124). Bourdieu, the French philosopher and anthropologist, in his reflections about 'the logic of practice', confirms this observation:

> *'The description of our experience cannot go beyond what specifically characterizes "lived" experience of the social world, that is, apprehension of the world as self-evident, 'taken for granted'.*
>
> *Bourdieu 1990:25*

I conclude from this that my description of practice could not include those things that we are doing without being conscious that we do them and, consequently, any attempt to articulate them had to result in a detached abstraction of what we actually did together.

The problem which arises when we take these detached and abstract accounts of what we do as facts is that practice appears as if it were something that physically exists and can therefore be described, duplicated, taught and transmitted to others (Gherardi 2009:116). This is exactly what I did in my narrative. I designed a project approach from "outside" this practice, an approach that I deduced from a memorised representation of a generalised framework and that I adapted through analysing the situation from a distance. During its application, this framework then became objectified, a thing that needed to be implemented, irrespective of the specific circumstances of my client's environment. It somehow became the sole content of the discussions, using the disengaged language imposed by the framework and thus deviating our focus from what was really going on between us.

Underlying this conception of practice is the ontological assumption that practice is a real thing and a distinct object which exists independently from any observer and is discoverable through detached observation from outside, thus separating the analysing

subject from the analysed object. The experience of knowing is then reduced to a pure act of human cognition. This view leads to poor and incomplete reproductions of practice based on a 'logic of science' in the tradition of a Western rationality (Chia 1996:33, Tsoukas & Sandberg 2011:340–341, Gherardi 2009:124; Chia & Holt 2006:637). This logic of science is, according to Brinkmann (2014:721), a professor in general psychology researching on qualitative inquiry, underpinned by a reasoning which makes practice appear as simply being deduced from a generalised knowledge, and thus assumes theory as being prior to practice.

Feldman & Orlikowsky (2011:1248–1249), two professors in management sciences whose article discusses the value of a 'practice theory', see in this a tendency to objectify the risk of reifying our practice and by doing so, assigning to it a universal meaning independent from its context.

I notice how I use such reifications all the time in my narrative, for example, when referring to "agile" projects or when explaining the impact of "local collaboration" on "iteration frequency", or when inviting people to "take on responsibility" or to be "hands-on". All these reified terms that I used to describe practice are often perceived to be 'sufficiently meaningful' (ibid:1248) and thus valid in all situations. I can retrace from my previous research (cf. research project 3: Control and Emotions - rational behaviour as an emotional defence (Menzies 1960)) that these tendencies to generalise may have been an attempt to control my anxieties to fail and thus had a function. These reifications, however, are not 'sufficiently meaningful' (ibid:1248) when facing practice in context. In the workshops where we discussed which approach to take, we regarded these abstract concepts as the only things to focus on. We spent hours elaborating on these detached ideas, taking a hypothetical macro-perspective, but somehow ignoring, or even avoiding, the discomforting confrontations with the what, where, how and who of what was going on. It is these 'micro-practices' (Chia & Holt (2006:636) or the 'micro-dynamics of everyday interaction' (Feldman & Orlikowsky 2011:1250) that we should turn our focus to if we want to have a chance of understanding our practice.

Shotter (2006), a professor in organisational communication, claims that this macro-perspective orientates us to think about the process of practice from outside of it, leading to an 'aboutness-perspective' (ibid:594), and concludes that such an abstract understanding of what we do blinds us to what happens within our daily practice:

> *in following 'the way of theory' (as I shall call it), rather than seeking to understand the unsystematic events that are unfolding in plain view before us, we do just the opposite: we seek a hidden, ideal, orderly state of affairs existing in reality, in itself, independently of any relations that we might have to it.*
>
> *Shotter 2006:587*

According to Shotter, by doing so we favour disengaged and uninvolved modes of relating with our social environment, a phenomenon that he refers to as 'loose jointedness' (ibid:588). He believes this prevents us from being responsive to our environment and thus necessarily leads to immobility of practice.

I assume that this is also what happened to me. I was implementing a project practice which must have appeared to Paul, Martha, Pierre and others as an abstract theory, that took no account of what they had been doing for many years in their company, i.e. their own practice. I had good intentions and wanted to be the expert consultant helping this customer to implement an important undertaking. However, by imposing a theorised practice on them, in the form of my expertise, I became insensitive to their concerns, thus not taking seriously what they did somehow ending up with what Bourdieu (1998:133) referred to as a 'spectator' of practice.

Absurdly, by trying to engage with Paul and his colleagues in this manner, they increasingly turned away from me and we ended up in a situation where I felt unable to help them.

Emerging Questions

This problem, which I also experienced in some of my previous projects, makes me question what I do as a project management consultant. If projects are, as I concluded in earlier research projects, complex social processes which cannot be predicted and controlled, are my interventions as a project management consultant then useless? Is the expertise which I gained over many years in similar situations worthless for my clients?

Such reflections make me wonder how I can engage with my customers in a more meaningful way both for them and for myself, whilst still relying on my substantial expertise and the tools I am expected to use by my clients. Therefore, in what follows, I

will try to further understand what practice is, how it is formed and how theory, in the form of methods and tools, and practice are related.

Practice - an Involved Participation

Turn to Practice - What Does it Mean?

There are an increasing number of scholars in literature who call for turning away from the detached theoretical approach, as they do not see practice merely as the consequence of an unreflective translation of rules and principles. Instead, they plead for a turn towards what we actually do in practice.

Feldman & Orlikowsky (2011:1240–41) suggest focusing on 'dynamics, relations and enactments' and thus emphasise the importance of human action and concentration on everyday activity, i.e. what people actually do together. Chia & McKay (2007:221) define practice as a non-linear process of day-to-day activities which emerge from the context in which practice takes place. Schatzki (2005:471–472), a professor of philosophy researching social practice, explicates practice as an 'organized, open-ended spatial-temporal manifold of actions' which is structured through human understanding of how to do things, by rules providing guidance and an array of possible ends. For Gherardi (2009:117–118) practice is a set of 'knowledgeable collective actions' and practicing means coordinating humans and their socially constructed objects within a socio-technical 'action-net' in which everything has its own place and meaning. Chia & Holt (2006:636:637) see practice as an 'organised consistency of purposive actions' producing spontaneous patterns which are uncontrollable through deliberate design and call for turning to these patterns to better understand human practice.

The emphasis of these scholars is on human activities that unfold in practice versus the traditional view where practice is commonly conceived to be the result of intentional and purposeful activities of individuals. From their perspective, practice is not a static thing that can be analysed from the outside and deliberately transformed as wished. Rather, practice is always in the process of 'becoming' (Chia 1996:33) or 'in the making' (Feldman & Orlikowsky 2011:1243) and should be seen as a dynamic and unexpected occurrence in the form of continuous processes, rather than producing pre-determined and stable outcomes.

Shotter (2006) believes that it is only 'from within' that these processes can be understood and thus calls for engaged, responsive thinking which is in stark contrast to the 'aboutness-perspective' (ibid:594) mentioned earlier.

Practice and Involvement

In his theory of 'being-in-the world' ('Dasein' Heidegger (1962:78)), Martin Heidegger, the renowned German philosopher, emphasises the role of involvement in everyday actions. I will now draw on this theory to further inquire into what it means to be involved in practice. For this purpose, I will mainly use Hubert Dreyfus (1995), an American professor of philosophy renowned for his interpretations of Heidegger's ideas in the Anglo-Saxon world, along with other scholars who use Heidegger's theoretical concepts to inquire into the field of social practice and whom I have already introduced above, namely Chia & Holt (2006), Chia & McKay (2007), Tsoukas & Sandberg (2011).

Heidegger's main research question turns around 'what it means for something to be' (Dreyfus 1995:1), leading him to try to 'understand the understanding of our practices' (ibid:29). In contrast to detached theoretical approaches, Heidegger considers involvement as a substantial form of engagement and emphasises unreflective background routines as a kind of 'dwelling' (ibid:45) in our occupation and from which all practice emerges. Heidegger refers to 'dwelling' as an 'intimate encounter' (Chia & McKay 2007:231) with our world, as a mode of 'being-in' or 'being-amidst' the world. This may be understood as 'inhabiting', where the objects that we use become a part of us, which is required for us to comprehensibly experience what we do (Dreyfus 1995:45).

Practice in Heidegger's terms may thus be described as 'absorbed' engagement in the everyday actions (Heidegger 1962:107) that we routinely perform without conscious consideration of what we do. This engagement in action reminds me of how in the workshops with Paul and his team I was absorbed in setting up the project, routinely doing what I always do in my job. It is this habitual and unconscious way of using my project management tools, explaining and negotiating how best to use them in their context, making me feel in my element and prompting me to behave in a way that I do not notice anymore as it has, over the years, become second nature to me.

This mode of engagement is in contrast to a seemingly objective stance favoured in Western scientific thinking, where a conscious detachment of the subject from the analysed object is considered a primary condition for the development of practice.

Dreyfus does not perceive Heidegger to argue against the usefulness of theoretical thinking. Rather, it is seen as a limited way to understand what is going on in practice. According to Heidegger's theory, detached inquiry alone does not produce knowledge but rather results in a mere contemplation that leads to an 'impoverished residue' (ibid: 47) of what practice is. Theory, therefore, cannot be conceived to be prior to practice. It is the routine involvement that Heidegger considers as the basic condition of human existence and the source of all intelligibility (Chia & Holt (2006:639–641), Chia & McKay (2007:230–232), Dreyfus (1995:1,3–4,45,47,60,63), Tsoukas & Sandberg (2011:393)).

Although Heidegger's theory could be easily misunderstood to dismiss detachment and simply replace it with another mode of engagement, it does consider that both modes of engagement are essential for the development of practice (Dreyfus 1995:60). I can retrace this interaction of both modes of engagement while I was routinely absorbed in what we did in the workshops or in the one-to-one meeting with Martha. I still had such moments of distancing myself from what was going on, making me notice particular behaviours and wonder about people's intentions. These short moments of detachment surely influenced how I dealt with these behaviours, either by reinforcing my efforts to convince people or by trying to find acceptable compromises. In this sense, I was not only mechanically reeling off some techniques and tools. I will draw on Heidegger's notion of 'breakdown' in a later chapter to make the important role of both modes of engagement in his thinking more explicit.

For the moment, in what follows in this chapter, I will stay with this notion of involvement, these 'background processes' (Dreyfus 1995:11) which, for Heidegger, are the source of our understanding of being. This view may provide some interesting insights into my understanding of the project management practice.

From a project management standpoint, I interpret Heidegger's theory of being-in-the-world, as presented by these scholars, as meaning that projects can no longer be considered as just being driven by pre-conceived action plans that simply need to be implemented independently of the social environment in which the projects take place. Rather, I conceive projects to materialise in the routine everyday activities in which project deliverables unfold through people's involvement in project practice. Although the generalised project management techniques play their part in this process, merely focusing on them without considering the context in which they are applied is likely to result in an overly detached approach, often leading to the ignoring of the micro-practices that we are involved in.

This is also what I think happened in the workshops where I presented the agile concepts and tools. Although I tried hard to explain these tools and techniques, describing how to apply them as several-steps procedures and pointing to the pitfalls to be avoided when using them, these explanations must have appeared to Sarah, Pierre and their colleagues as idle descriptions, similar to trying to explain to a novice how to ride a bike or how to swim. The explanations made a lot of sense to me, as I had experienced these methods and tools on various occasions. I can imagine, however, that EFI's team perceived some of my explanations as quite abstract and not really relevant or even inconceivable in their context. This became evident after the workshops when they implemented most of the agreed measures half-heartedly or even seemed to just continue with what they were already doing, as Martha had predicted in the one-to-one meeting. Assuming that I could simply transmit my comprehension of how to manage an agile project was not a promising approach. I now see, drawing on Heidegger, how meaning emerges while engaging in practice, rather than being simply transferred as generalised mental models. Without having used these tools themselves, it is unlikely that Paul and his team were able to retrace all the particularities of my explanations.

Therefore, I conclude that it may be worth considering expanding the focus from the mere implementation of project management tools such as organisation charts, governance structures, descriptions of roles and responsibilities, project plans, stakeholder analysis charts, risk logs and so forth, as the usual evidence for a successful project consulting intervention.

When I now think about describing how I engage in practice, I supplement the formal depiction of project management with terms such as observing, discussing, explaining, persuading, doubting, inquiring, negotiating, organising, arbitrating, advising, arguing and so forth.

Furthermore, I now add emotional expressions to this list such as fearing, being angry, feeling ashamed, being pleased and other acts of feeling that come along with our engagement into practice, as involving oneself into a social group always also means being emotionally immersed, and these feelings, in turn, affect our practice (cf. research project 3). Such feelings were constantly influencing my actions in the workshops, for example, when I felt excited as we found solutions for how to finally implement the iterative approach. But, I also felt disappointed and frustrated when they did not recognise the benefits of collocating the project teams and simply rejected my expert

arguments. I imagine that it was also the intensity of these feelings which blinded me from paying attention to the issues in these moments during the workshop.

Describing practice then means also turning our attention to noticing what we do and what we feel while being absorbed in these actions. It means realising that things we take for granted somehow remain unnoticed to us and thus go unquestioned (Wittgenstein 1968:42e). It is in becoming aware of these things that an 'engaged, responsive understanding' becomes available to us (Shotter 2006:588-589).

During the workshops I began to notice such things, for example, when Sarah covertly invited Pierre to form a coalition with her to avoid the colocation of the teams, or when Paul did not engage in the discussions, leaving it to me to convince his colleagues. Or the fact that Martha did not speak up during the whole workshop, making me question why she was even appointed a team leader. I did not really wonder what their concerns were, nor did I try to explain their behaviour. Although I noticed them, I simply ignored these signs. Instead, I continued to explain the agile concepts, assuming that my expertise would be reason enough for them to adhere to my proposals. It would perhaps have been useful, following Shotter's claim, to take these signs as an invitation to engage with them in a discussion around their concerns and to pay attention to how my own feelings influenced my behaviour. This would help me become more aware what was going for them and for myself, rather than monotonously chanting the official project management mantra just to avoid these reflections. Taking these signs seriously does not necessarily lead to better outcomes but might contribute to a more meaningful discussion.

Practice and Methods

However, if meaning is emerging from being involved in practice, as claimed by Heidegger, I wonder what role my expertise plays and how my kitbag of tools and techniques interferes with my client's practice.

In the Dreyfus & Dreyfus model on skill acquisition, what distinguishes an expert from other, less skilful actors, is that this person not only sees what needs to be done but also knows how to achieve it. What tools to use and how to use them in the specific context thus requires skilful judgements to be made (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 2005:787).

I wonder how we make these judgments as I notice that I often do not use the project management tools and techniques in the way that they have been conceived, and rarely

in the same way from one project to another. Dreyfus & Dreyfus claim that the choices we make are expressed in the very moment of the situation, while dwelling in it. In their model they provide a sensible explanation for what they call 'intuitive judgements'. They see them as the outcome of 'immediate, unreflective situational responses' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 2005:779), not merely made through deliberate and logical reasoning based on indubitable laws, but also building upon a set of rules of thumb (ibid:780). It is this combination which is required, according to Dreyfus & Dreyfus, to achieve the level of expertise needed for intuitive judgement.

In Heidegger's logic, this level can only be reached through involving oneself in the situation. It is only in the emotional experience of practice itself that we gradually learn how to respond to the multitude of circumstances that we are facing. The net of potential responses can possibly be untangled by using some generic rules and principles, but requires what Dreyfus & Dreyfus call 'situational discriminations', meaning choices which require the consideration of the specific contexts in which those choices are made (ibid:786).

Such judgements form part of our expertise and can only be learned through mundane involvement in practice. Using this expertise then means participating in practice and finding ways to relate to the situation in the most meaningful way (Gherardi 2009:117).

With this understanding of expertise, I now perceive those continuous discussions in the workshops on what methods and tools to use and how to use them as negotiations where different interests and various feelings, along with my intuitive judgment, guided us to more or less satisfying compromises. Several propositions that I made led to heated discussions, but we often came to more or less stable agreements which until now have worked for both sides. Some tools and methods have even somehow found their ways into my client's practice, although, at times, they result in strange outgrowths.

All these actions and feelings combined with intuitive judgements is what I understand Heidegger to mean by dwelling in practice.

Dwelling - a Social Theory?

However, in Heidegger's theory, the notion of 'dwelling' is only applied to objects. Heidegger himself mainly talks about 'entities', meaning equipment and things in general, and how we engage with these objects in an absorbed involvement. The role of

human agency, individual or collective, seems not to be an explicit part of his philosophical reflections and he even seems to differentiate between dealing with objects and dealing with human beings ('Of course, Being towards Others is ontologically different from Being towards Things …' Heidegger 1962:162).

My research for the Doctor of Management leads me to conceive practice as an inherently social process (cf. research projects 2 and 3). I experienced my intervention with EFI not as an isolated practice where I was just absorbed with using some tools and producing some deliverables. Everything I did was in relation with EFI's team, and all the challenges that I experienced while discussing, negotiating and judging were in relation to other human beings in the process of dwelling.

In the following chapter I will explore what is means to understand practice as a social process.

Practice - an Inherently Social Process

Dwelling - a Social Process

Tsoukas & Sandberg (2011), two management scholars who developed a 'logic of practice' in organisational management and in this research build on Heidegger's theory of 'being-in-the-world', have reformulated Heidegger's term 'dwelling' and used the term 'entwinement' instead to emphasis human agency in the process:

> *Taking entwinement as the primary mode of existence means that for something to be, it needs to show up as something - namely, as part of a meaningful relational totality with other beings.*
>
> *Tsoukas & Sandberg 2011:343*

Similar to Tsoukas & Sandberg (2011), other scholars who draw on Heidegger for conceptualising practice also understand sociality to be an implicit part of his theory. They perceive dwelling in practice to be a way of being in the world and always related to other persons, as everything we do as individuals is always and inevitably already situated in a social context. For them, practice is a space of human actions which

continuously produces social structures and thus reflexively generates its own context in the form of order creating mechanisms (Feldman & Orlikowsky (2011:1241), Gherardi (2009:118,124), Schatzki (2005:469,471,480), Asper & Kohl (2013:497), Chia & Holt (2006:638))

Yet, Heidegger's theory, although considered by these scholars as implicitly social, does not clearly explain what these social patterns are, nor how they influence human agency while being absorbed in practice.

For this purpose, I will now draw on the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and his theory on 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1990), along with the American pragmatist John Dewey (1922) and his understanding of human conduct.

Social Structures as Dispositions to Act

The social phenomena transpiring from practice that is described by the scholars mentioned above is what Bourdieu perceives as a 'system of dispositions', labelled 'habitus'. He claims that by practically and actively relating to our social world we produce 'durable and transposable' tendencies to act, which Bourdieu describes as 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures'. By this he means that from a multitude of practical actions over time general dispositions to act emerge, which in turn produce new individual and collective practices, and this cyclic process secures consistent and reliable social patterns (Bourdieu 1990:53–54).

Dewey (1922) speaks of 'habits' when referring to these social patterns. He perceives these habits as 'predispositions' or a 'readiness' to act in a particular manner (ibid:27). He claims that habits have a function in that they are 'conditions of intellectual efficiency' (ibid:113). This function serves to protect us from irrelevant information that is not routinely required for executing our practice, and habits are thus useful 'shortcuts to getting things done in the world' (Mowles 2015a:167). Without habits, efficient practice would be impossible. Dewey does not believe that habits produce simple mechanical repetitions of specific acts, rather he understands them to trigger a 'sensitiveness' to certain impulses, preferences and aversions (Dewey 1922:28).

I understand Bourdieu's and Dewey's notions of habits as a susceptibility to acting in certain ways that results in routine behaviours. This is very similar to the notion of 'dwelling' used by Heidegger, with the caveat that neither Bourdieu nor Dewey leave

any doubt that this unconscious acting is inherently social through the collective mechanism of habit construction. These social patterns of interaction play an important role in the meaning-making process, as the patterns are not only formed by us in our social practice, but also simultaneously form us as they influence how we act.

In my narrative, the most obvious example of these tendencies might be our differing conceptions of responsibility-taking. In EFI's organisational context, where cost efficiency was at the top of the managerial agenda for a couple of years, taking on responsibility was risky and any kind of failure in such an important project might lead to severe consequences for those made responsible for it. Under the influence of this threat they developed a common understanding of what it meant for them to take on responsibility. Together, they created a common aversion to taking on responsibility in their company. At the same time, this commonly created pattern influenced how they led their project. Inviting them to simply adopt my understanding of it, an assumption which might make perfect sense from a rational perspective, was unlikely to be accepted considering that their common perception of responsibility-taking was driven by a disposition to act that resulted from a long-term social process.

Similarly, the understanding of responsibility which I had developed in previous projects was also the result of socially created patterns that made me consider "feeling responsible" as a key trait of every project manager. This conception evolved over the years into an individual habit that became so natural to me that any other understanding of project leadership was inconceivable and caused me to react in the myopic manner demonstrated in the narrative.

These reflections on habits also make me aware of how I used to talk and write about "my practice". In previous versions of this research project my learning set pointed to several occasions where I used this expression, and I wondered why this was so problematic. Now I can see that in the way I brought it into play, by labelling what I do when acting in EFI's environment, I gave the impression that I believed it to be "my" own practice, something that I had constructed independently from others, that I had learned from schoolbooks and which simply needed to be rigorously applied. Furthermore, by doing so, I implicitly distinguished between "my" practice and "their" practice, and somehow presented "my practice" as being superior to theirs.

With Bourdieu's and Dewey's concepts of 'habitus' and 'habits', I now perceive what I called "my practice" as a historically and socially constructed propensity to act, as the

outcome of my involvement in many past social practices. I was part of this process, involved in forming these habits while these socially created tendencies to act simultaneously led me to understand and do my consulting job in certain predisposed ways. Through my narrative, I came to recognise this as something I do without thinking about how I do it, something that feels second nature to me, making me feel in my element and giving me the sense of dwelling in practice.

However, this unconscious and unreflective way of doing my job also led me to somehow ignore what was happening around me. Habits may allow routine work to function, but they are also persistent and self-reinforcing and thus resistant to change. Dewey (1922:82) conceives that habits preserve themselves by influencing current actions and thus constantly reproduce themselves in their own image. This means that we do not easily give up habits developed through our involvement in various practices. The perpetual character of habits might also explain my resolute attempts to convince Paul, Martha, Pierre and the other team leaders to do things in ways that made sense to me, which were conformed to habits I was familiar with. But, it may also explain why they could not easily put aside their own working habits and convictions, and resisted my attempts to discipline them in an equally determined way.

I therefore conclude that these socially constructed patterns play an important role while being involved in practice. These patterns are paradoxically being formed by us and forming us at the same time (Griffin 2002:142). While forming us, our habits are enabling and constraining our actions in that these habituated patterns of interaction both help us to function efficiently and, at the same time, prevent us from realising what goes on or from adapting to changing circumstances.

Human Agency - a Paradoxical Relation of Social habits and Individual intentions

I understand from the previous insights that socially constructed dispositions significantly influence how we observe, reason and judge what is going on around us. Dewey concludes that what we express while practicing as individuals are primarily these tendencies to act and that human behaviour is a direct consequence of them (Dewey 1922:115–116). Taking such a social view on how practice evolves might lead to the conclusion that practice is purely determined by social structures.

However, I wonder what such a conclusion would mean for my interventions as an external consultant. If human conduct is mainly determined through socially created habits, how would I be able, as a consultant, to influence my clients' practices?

I do not interpret Dewey as saying that habits produce standard and harmonised acts in themselves, but rather, as previously mentioned, that habituated patterns create a 'sensitiveness' to certain impulses, preferences and aversions (Dewey 1922:28). How we act must then also have an individual dimension. I tend to believe that I had an intentional influence on EFI's practice. After all, Paul and his team implemented quite a few of the measures that I proposed, though, I must admit, not necessarily in a way that I could control and often resulting in unintended consequences. In the rational tradition of Western scientific thinking the answer to this question seems clear: individual intention is considered the driving force responsible for the development of practice. But, what I call 'my' intentions here is in itself already, according to Bourdieu and Dewey, the outcome of a social patterning from previous experiences and thus not purely individual neither.

The question of whether human agency is individual or collective may therefore be too short-sighted, and a less trivial explanation might be required.

Dewey (1922:116) emphasises that neither social habits nor intentional individual reasoning, can individually claim full agency for human conduct, but that both have their stake in this process of shaping human actions. He perceives habits as too determined, fixed and absorbed in themselves to be able to cope with unexpected situations, whereas he considers theoretical reasoning as too distant from the events to allow for meaningful judgements to be made about them. I understand Dewey to mean that habits without individual intelligence would lead to pure mechanical processing without any potential for adaptation, whereas pure individual agency would be too disconnected from practice to provide a relevant view of it.

Dewey thus concludes that a 'certain delicate combination' of habitual tendencies and individual stimuli is required to explain human comportment and both need to interplay in order to be able to adjust to the various circumstances that we face in our social environments.

Dewey's view on human agency reminds me of the concept of Norbert Elias that I already introduced in a previous research project (cf. research project 2: 5. Projects as

social processes). Elias (2000) was a sociologist concerned with understanding the role of the individual and society in the civilising process. He expresses a similar idea to Dewey by claiming that the individual and the social, in the form of habituated patterns, are both part of the same process of meaning-making, and thus argues that the individual is forming the social while simultaneously being formed by it. I see the same paradoxical relationship between Dewey's notions of habits and individual impulses as being responsible for human agency.

In this chapter, I have referred in detail to the social character of dwelling in practice and how we need to be involved in social practice to make it a meaningful experience. I have emphasised the role of habits in this process of meaning-making, expressed in the form of our tendency to act, and discussed how this interpretation of human practice has shifted my understanding about "my practice" as a project management consultant. I have further pointed to the enabling role of these habitual dispositions as a prerequisite for efficient functioning while simultaneously constraining us to adapt to new situations. I have emphasised the role of individual impulses, through conscious, reflective and intentional individual actions, in order to secure the adaptability of human practice to environmental circumstances. These reflective stimuli are considered by both Dewey and Heidegger to play an important and significant part in the process of reproduction of practice (Dewey 1922:118, Dreyfus 1995:60).

It is this interplay of reflective detachment from practice and involved practicing which I would like to turn to now, to illustrate how both modes of engagement fit together.

Practice - a Social Process of Detached Involvement

The Concept of Breakdown

Both Heidegger and Dewey have a similar explanation for the interrelation of both modes of engagement, i.e. reflective detachment and involved practicing. They see these modes for encountering our world as related through surprising moments that suspend habituated practice and invite contemplation. They claim that when unexpected things happen while we are routinely engaged in practice, the habitual activity is interrupted. These disturbances then incite individuals to think about what they do and how they can find new ways to overcome the felt disruption from their practice (Dewey 1922:117; Heidegger 1962:107; Dreyfus 1995:68–69).

When thinking back to my previous research projects, I notice how such disturbances from practice have affected me in my career and led me to write about such moments of disruption even many years after their occurrence. My first research project, a reflexive autobiography, is bristling with disruptive incidents which caused me to deeply reflect about what was going on in the practice of my life and question my realist world view. One of the more concise moments may be the one when I became aware of how I tend to fade out my emotions by taking on an over-rationalised stance, even in very private moments of my life (cf. research project 3: narrative about how I dealt with my father's health treatment). Another example is my experience in the second research project, when I was told in a project-close-down meeting that I had failed in a project which my team and I had considered a major success; this situation caused me to doubt my reliance on predictions and success measurements and reflect on the influence of power relations upon project results. Or, a disruption of consulting practice described in my third research project, when losing control over a crisis project made me doubt if my methods and tools really gave me control over my projects, leading me to reflect on the role of emotions in such moments where we strive for control.

According to Heidegger and Dewey, these kinds of disruptions from our ongoing activities come into our awareness and require more or less significant moments of critical and disengaged consideration. In a Heideggerian world, these moments are commonly referred to as 'breakdowns' (Dreyfus 1995:70, Koschmann et al. 1998:31–33,

Brinkmann 2014:722,724)[5]. I find the choice of this term interesting, as it seems to denote an abnormal interruption from an ideal situation. Indeed, in Heidegger's understanding, dwelling in practice is the supreme form of engagement, and anything preventing absorbed involvement is literally considered as a breakdown from this ideal functioning. According to this logic, a breakdown is just a derivative from the primary dwelling mode (Dreyfus 1995:45).

This conception of breakdown also resonates with what I experienced in the EFI project. It reminds me of the situation where I felt that my consulting routine broke down in a way that created frustrations and doubts. In my narrative, I emphasised how implementations of project management methodologies became second nature to me and how I often habitually execute these procedures without really thinking how I do it. When people started to resist the measures we had agreed to implement, I felt such disruptions from this habituated practice. An example of this was when I had noticed that the team leaders did not track their deliverables and had no view on their progress, and also when I had sensed that they refused to take on responsibility for what they and their teams had to deliver. These breakdowns made me pause in my routine consulting activity, as I tried to understand what they were doing, their reasons for doing things in this way, and I evaluated and judged if what they were doing was appropriate in their context from my view as a project management expert (cf. chapter: 'intuitive judgements' Dreyfus & Dreyfus 2005:779). In some cases, I was open for compromise, in others, as for example with regards to responsibility-taking, I was less ready to negotiate, as my experience told me that this was too risky for the project. Building on many years of project management practice, I concluded, that this was not the route to take and that corrective actions were required.

I did not, however, experience a breakdown just in my understanding of project management. The fact that they also started to avoid me generated doubts about how I engaged with them. I felt concerned that they did not accept my expert advice and started to doubt how I could do my job as a consultant if they did not let me help them. After all, that was why they had hired me. Their reluctance to consider my advice made me feel excluded, and I asked myself how I had contributed to the situation to make

[5] Heidegger himself does not use this term; he mainly refers to disturbances experienced while being absorbed in what we do, when things break down and thus change their mode of existence from 'ready-to-hand' to become unavailable, i.e. 'unready-to-hand' or 'present-at-hand' (Heidegger 1962:103–104).

them behave like this. These reflections made me wonder how to engage with them in a more meaningful way.

Dewey[6] claims that such disruptions are often dealt with by simply trying to recover the situation, falling back to patterns of reaction that do not promote learning and thus do not allow for a new practice to emerge (Koschmann et al. 1998:32).

In my case, I showed a similar reaction. I tried to fix the problem and get the team leaders back on the "right" path. I did so by trying to convince them about the necessity of a professional approach and engaging with them to find ways to make those tools and techniques work for them. I also tried to fix our relationship by using more subtle ways of engaging with them, doing one-to-one meetings to discuss with each of them how best to implement what we agreed upon in the workshops. The meeting with Martha that I described in the narrative is exemplarily in showing such an attempt to fix their behaviour.

Breakdown from Practice - an Opportunity for a New Practice

Dewey does not use the term "breakdown" and does not conceive those disruptions as abnormal disturbances of an ideal practice which need fixing. He sees them instead as normal interruptions of practice requiring conscious 'readjustments', as an invitation to engage in doubt and inquiry which may contribute to the reproduction of a new practice. For him, such disruptions are an essential part of the meaning-making process, which he sees as a continuous flux of interruptions and reconstruction of habits, rather than perceiving the development of practice as deliberately constructed through relentlessly appealing to rational principles (Dewey 1922:117; Koschmann et al. 1998:32,40).

Dewey (1896b) builds for his conception of practice reproduction on the assumption that thinking and acting are inseparable and mutually interrelated, thus forming an 'entire act' (ibid:366) where experience develops continuously in the form of an evolutive process. This holistic understanding of the concept of stimulus-response is in contrast to the dualist assumption prevailing in traditional psychology and underlying most project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009), where thought and action is

[6] in Boydston, J. A. (Ed.) (1969–1991

separated and believed to be related in a linear and sequential manner, and where experience is not continuously evolving but one experience is merely replaced by another. In Dewey's understanding of this process of thinking and acting, a breakdown results in a thoughtful act emerging from action, as part of one and the same process of meaning-making, where both thought and action inform each other at the same time, thus contributing to the reproduction of a new experience (Dewey 1896b: 358,360,363,366).

According to this logic, Dewey is drawing on an abductive reasoning, a form of explanatory reasoning which implies that something may be, rather than providing evidence that something actually is (inductive reasoning) or must be (deductive reasoning). In this form of reasoning, thought and action are related through surprise, raising doubt and inquiry into what surprises us (Brinkmann 2014:721–722). It is this abductive process, according to Simpson & Elkjaer (2006), two scholars researching practice from a pragmatist perspective, that allows us to generate alternative responses to inquiries resulting from doubt experienced in action and as such, is the only source for new creative practice (ibid:3–4).

In the meeting with Martha, this continuous and correlated interaction between action, doubt and inquiry is well described. We were in a constant flux of arguing, experiencing unexpected behaviours, doubting each other's motivations, and inquiring into what manoeuvres to take next. It is in this interrelated process of acting, doubting and inquiring that our discussions evolved to result in something that was not fully controllable by either one of us.

Our discussion was thus interspersed with smaller disruptions. For example, when she overtly avoided my questions or answered in unexpected ways, her defensive answers caused me to experience intensive feelings of frustration and uncertainty which amplified my overall sense of a breakdown from practice. During these disruptions, I doubted and tried to identify reasons for her behaviour, questioning my own role in this discussion and inquiring into tactics to guide the conversation in certain directions and searching for strategies to persuade her to do what I perceived to be right. I then tested these tactics and strategies on the fly to see how she reacted, thus stumbling from one breakdown to another. Actually, in this situation I was just doing what Dewey referred to: I fell back into old habits to try to fix the situation, taking my own assumptions for granted and not seeing myself as part of the problem. By doing so, I reinforced my

habitual way of managing projects and missed the chance for co-constructing a new practice with my client.

I had similar incidents with other team leaders and with Paul, and this same process applies also to my experience when I drove back home to Luxemburg that evening. Although more emotionally detached from the actual situation, I was still under its influence and the experience of the meeting caused me to further doubt and reflect. I felt challenged in my role as a consultant and experienced their obvious indifference to my expert interventions as intriguing and raising doubts about my role in all of this. In this moment of more distant reflections[7] I was able to not only locate the problem within Martha and her colleagues, but also consider my own contribution to the situation. I became aware of how I had pushed them for weeks to adopt a project approach that they were not familiar with and which was in conflict with some of their habits and beliefs. I recognised how I rushed through this intervention in a hurry to finish a contract I had only accepted to please my sponsor, TheSoftwareCompany. This led me to ignore some of their concerns and simply impose my views. At that moment, I could imagine how my determined manner, demonstrating a lack of interest in what they did and imposing my way of managing a project, must have appeared to Paul and his team as quite detached and unhelpful.

With some distance, though still absorbed in the event, I was able to inquire more deeply into the situation, seeing myself not just as a neutral analyst able to change their practice from outside, but considering myself as part of this practice and also recognising how my intentions affected their behaviour as much as their actions affected me.

These thoughts may lead to the conclusion that by stepping back from a situation and taking a reflective stance, we may get new insights in what we do, which can then be fed back into our practice. Indeed, during the emotional involvement in the meeting with Martha, I was unable to get out of 'fixing' mode. With the benefit of hindsight, and consequently feeling less affected by the situation, I found it easier to see myself as part of the problem and not simply blame others. This new perspective led me to see the necessity for changing my approach and engaging in a different way with Paul and his team.

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[7] For the purpose of this research project, the term "reflection" stands for any kind of thoughtful contemplation and I do not make a distinction here between reflection (i.e. thinking about something) and reflexivity (i.e. thinking about one's own thinking) (Mowles 2015a:25).

Elias (1987b:46–48) explains this social phenomenon by the fact that situations we perceive as uncontrollable provoke emotions in human beings which further reduce the chances of controlling the situation. This vicious cycle makes it difficult, according to Elias, to detach oneself from situations of overwhelming emotions. In the situation with EFI, I perceived such feelings of uncertainty and this created various emotions: frustration because of their indifference to my interventions, anxieties because I felt concerned that my intervention could be perceived as a failure, and shame because as an expert I could not solve the problem. This amalgam of feelings made it difficult for me to challenge my own habits and thus limited my reflections to simply trying to fix their behaviour and regain control over the situation and my emotions by engaging in tactics and strategies of persuasion and manipulation. Elias' understanding of the interplay between detachment and involvement, perceiving them as two extremes that both always co-exist and 'keep each other in check' (Elias 1956:226–227), also explains how I was able, hours after this meeting and thus more detached from it, to take, what Elias calls, a 'detour via detachment' (ibid:229), to engage in deeper reflections which challenged my own habits and beliefs.

Although I can see the benefits of such reflections as they provide new perspectives and allow inquiry into doubt, I believe that Heidegger's notion of breakdown or Dewey's conception of doubt and inquiry or Elias' invitation for a 'detour via detachment' should not lead us into idealising reflections. In Western tradition there is a strong tendency to glorify detached reflections leading to a divine faith in scientific thinking and control of emotions (Elias 1956:229). In project management theories this tendency to favour thinking over acting becomes particularly evident through the emphasis that these theories place upon the potential of anticipation and control through the processes of planning, executing, monitoring and closing in project management (PMI 2013, Prince2 2009, IPMA 2010). Even in agile project management theories (Pichler 2008, Sutherland 2012, Sutherland & Schwaber 2016), although they are less rigid in their approach and less plan-driven, the same principle of "thought before action" applies. I am not criticising the usefulness of such methods of anticipation and control, as I myself use them in my daily work, but I am starting to increasingly challenge the blind reliance on detached reflections as the main source of understanding and meaning-making which underlies such a view.

What Heidegger, Dewey and Elias are calling for is a less trivial conception of the process of meaning-making, where retrospective reflection is just playing a part in a

complex process of detached involvement. It cannot be predicted what the outcome of such a thoughtful intentional intervention will be, but it will not inevitably lead to a better practice. It may also lead to something very unexpected as shown in my experience with EFI.

The retrospective reflections that I made, while giving me new a perspective on how I might engage with them in a more meaningful way, did not lead to a solution either, at least not in the sense of "solving" the situation. On the contrary, when I raised my concerns with Paul and the team about our working relationship the week after, the outcome was not what I had intended. Based on our discussions, it occurred to me that they simply did not expect me to play the role that I had tried to take on. I became aware that they may have perceived my obstinacy to make them take on more responsibility for the project deliverables as offensive behaviour from someone who was simply not expected to play this role in such a way. They expected me to implement some agile tools and techniques and nothing more. I came to the conclusion that I had to accept this, and eventually decided that I should do what I had been called for in the first place. I finalised the implementation of some more agile tools and techniques, documented what I had done, and a few weeks later we agreed that my job was complete and finished the contract.

I conclude from this that what these retrospective reflections bring about can only be abstractions of a practice and can only become meaningful 'against a background of involved activity'. What this means cannot be determined simply through detached reflections; they need to be tested in real life conditions and probed in the emotion-provoking social network of human interaction (Dreyfus 1995:74; Dreyfus 2007:109).

Reflections - an Emotional Concept

Remarkably, emotions seem to play an important role in this seemingly detached reflective thought process. Burkitt (2012:469), a scholar whose research focuses on conceptualising the effects of emotions in social practice, sees reflections as essentially determined by our emotions and even considers emotions as the main motives for reflective thought. I thus understand my reflections in the narrative not merely as a rational choice, as a deliberate 'detour via detachment' that I consciously decided to take, but rather see them always in relation to an emotional experience of a breakdown from involved practice.

It was only through the emotional experience of such disturbances from practice, noticing how the team leaders avoided me, perceiving their lack of interest and their resistance to implementing the proposed measures, that I was starting to doubt and challenge what I was doing. Only the feelings of exclusion, shame and anger that resulted from these breakdowns made this experience relevant enough to come to my consciousness and make me reflect on what went wrong and what I could do. The meeting with Martha then was the final emotional straw breaking the camel's back, leading me to the conclusion that I needed an open discussion with them about how this cooperation should continue.

Without emotional involvement and without the emotion-provoking experience of a disruption from practice, I would not have been able to engage in any meaningful reflections about this problem and would have stubbornly continued to try to fix the situation. This leads me to conclude that any reflections not resulting from such an emotional experience of a breakdown from engaged practice must be rather detached from what goes on in practice, and I wonder what such reflections would be able to contribute to this practice.

These explorations on the relationship between detached reflection and habitual involvement lead me to conclude that both modes of engagement are deeply interrelated and are connected through the concept of 'breakdown' from practice. It is only through the continuous correlation of action, breakdown and thought, as part of the same process of meaning-making, that practice is spontaneously reproduced into a new, but not necessarily better practice. It is in this sense that I start to understand practice as a social process of detached involvement.

Conclusion

Upon starting this research project I noticed the difficulties I experience when describing what I actually do when engaging with my clients. This led me to describe practice as something that is mainly produced through replication of theoretical knowledge, and thus as existing independently from its context. I concluded that seeing practice in such a detached manner deviates our attention from the micro-details that are going on in our practice.

In order to get more insights into these micro-practices, I turned to Heidegger's theory of 'being-in-the-world' ('Dasein' Heidegger 1962:78) and his idea that it is through routinely involving ourselves in practice that we experience and understand our world. From this perspective, I conceive project management practice to materialise in the everyday activities that we routinely engage in, and not just as being the logical result of a consequent translation of rules and principles.

I then used Dewey's concept of habits to emphasise the role of social patterns in this routine involvement, and explained how socially constructed habits, in the form of tendencies to act, produce routine individual behaviours while at the same time being formed by them. These habituated patterns have the role of enabling us to function efficiently while being immersed in practice, but at the same time, self-reinforce and thus constrain our capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

Conceiving practice as being socially determined made me wonder what influence I have over changing my clients' practice as a project management consultant. According to project management theories, (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009, Agile Alliance Organisation 2001) individual intentions, in the form of detached reflections, are conceived to be the main source for understanding human practice. In Heidegger's and Dewey's conception of practice, however, reflective thinking is not considered to be a superior form of engagement with our world, but rather part and parcel of the same process of meaning-making in which routine involvement and detached reflection are related through the concept of 'breakdown'. It is through the emotional experience of a disruption from habitual engagement that we become conscious of and think about what we do and find new, though not necessarily better, ways to engage in practice.

From this perspective, reflections only become meaningful in this emotional process of involvement and detachment and, as such, are nothing more than mundane actions in the social process, and there is no way of 'doubling' this process (Stacey 2011:338). Involvement, breakdown and detached reflection are part of the same process and simultaneously and mutually inform each other while reproducing practice.

I conclude from all this that practice is not fully knowledgeable through theory and is not a static object that we can shape at will, as often assumed in project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009, Agile Alliance Organisation 2001). Rather, I understand practice now as the result of a continuously evolving social process of detached involvement.

Through this research on project management practice, I have become increasingly aware of how practice is infiltrated by paradoxical patterns where seemingly opposing, and thus mutually exclusive concepts are co-existing and reciprocally influencing each other at the same time (Mowles 2015a:13). It is this paradox[8] of "both…and, at the same time" which I perceive as shifting my understanding of practice in subtle but still important ways.

Griffin (2002) illustrates this complex form of relationship by using the metaphor of a 'stream', which I find helpful for understanding this "both…and, at the same time" concept. For him, we are not just standing beside the stream or floating on the stream in a boat that we try to keep afloat, as if separate from the stream and simply interacting with it. Rather, we are ourselves the stream, immersed in its continuous dynamic and without any reference point indicating that we are caught up in it (ibid:13).

Translated to project management consultancy practice, I understand this metaphor to mean that, as consultants, we are not simply detached observers of our clients' practice who just participate in it as autonomous individuals, relating to our customers by bluntly interacting without affecting each other. Rather, as practitioners, we "are" the practice that we are involved in. We cannot step outside of it without being affected by what we have experienced while dwelling in it and without having left any footprints of our own participation.

We are formed by the social patterns reinforcing practice while at the same time forming these patterns, either by reproducing the same habits or by shaping new ones through the process of breakdown, doubt and inquiry.

What does this mean for my consultancy practice? I understand Griffin (2002) to mean that we need to take our participation more seriously, not relying solely on leadership models and management tools, but rather understanding ourselves as being simultaneously detached observers and involved practitioners in a paradoxical practice where we continuously co-create our future (ibid:17). Griffin calls for a practice of "participative self-organisation" (ibid: 14), where there is no separation between the exploring subject and the investigated object, as part of a social process which is embracing the paradox of seemingly opposing and incompatible forces prevailing at the

[8] from 'para doxa', i.e. against common sense (Mowles 2015a:13)

same time, and which in their mutual interaction transform each other in ways which are not reliably predictable nor fully controllable.

3. Synoptical Summaries of Research Projects

Research Project 1: a Reflexive Autobiography

Research project 1 is a reflexive autobiography of the experiences, influences, and ways of thinking that have informed my life. It is a narrative that emphasises several significant events in my life that we can assume have shaped my understanding of a particular theme.

The events that I chose for this purpose were mainly related to my job as a project manager for technology-driven change projects in the financial sector in Luxemburg. Project management is a theme that has dominated my professional life for 25 years and thus has particular relevance to me.

I started this reflective narrative by describing how, since my youth, I have developed a strong sense of self-determination, but at the same time show an inclination for caring for others and feeling responsible for all that goes on in my surroundings. I further described how, through my science-based education, which resulted in a university degree in business informatics, and through my career in the financial sector, I took on a rather rational world view with an intransigent understanding of what I believed to be right or wrong.

I concluded that this understanding may have led me to favour a career in project management, a discipline that I considered to be quite different from the "business as usual" approach of the daily operations in organisations.

Building on the main project management theories (PMI (2013)[9], IPMA (2010)[10], Prince2 (2009)[11], Patzak & Rattay (2004), Kerzner (2009), I recognised project management as a methodology that is frequently chosen when a company is faced with a unique situation. It is assumed that these situations require dedicated, multi-disciplinary task forces with lean and flexible structures, and which foster team spirit, self-initiative and empowerment of the team. Unlike organisation management, my experience of projects was that they were thrilling and dynamic, and focused on achieving pre-set and clear goals with ambitious deadlines. I initially perceived project environments as being less interspersed with organisational politics, and rather as building on harmonious teamwork where team members were expected to leave aside, at least for the duration of the project, their personal and department egoisms and efficiently work together to achieve the common project objectives.

I described project management theories as a body of knowledge comprehensibly prescribing what to do and how to proceed in every phase of the project. I held onto the underlying assumption that if correctly applied, these methods and tools would inevitably lead to the pre-planned outcomes. I felt that I was given clear instructions on how to deal with these uncertain projects and sensed that all was under control when I relied upon them. Managing projects in this way somehow provided me with an illusion of control which fit well with my needs for autonomy and self-realisation and conformed with my rational world view.

When reflecting in this research project about the kind of thinking that informed my understanding of project management, I concluded, building on Stacey (2011), Anderson

[9] Project Management Institute - The Project Management Institute (PMI) is an American nonprofit professional body for project management. Its services include the development of project management standards, research, education, publication, training and certification in project management and is commonly accepted as the international standard in project management - Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Management_Institute, March 2018.

[10] International Project Management Association - IPMA is the umbrella organisation for national project management bodies in Europe and its competence baseline (ICB) is recognised to provide the theoretical foundation for project management in European countries - Source: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Project_Management_Association, March 2018.

[11] PRojects IN Controlled Environments - Prince2 is a project methodology with emphasis on project structures, dividing projects into manageable and controllable stages. It is mainly used in UK and some northern European countries - Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRINCE2, March 2018.

(1990), Russell (2013) and Rorty (1991), that I was informed by a realist conception of the world, an assumption that there is a pre-given reality that exists independently from human interpretation and just needs to be discovered and understood, locating reality in the cognitive capacities of individuals and defining mind 'as the supreme organiser and discoverer of all reality' (Anderson 1990:60).

I can see how my rational world view has influenced my private and professional behaviour for so many years in such very specific ways. My realist perspective led me to perceive project outcomes as predictable, and determined by rigid and indisputable success criteria which clearly defined what was to be delivered, when, and at what cost. Such an approach enabled me to distinguish unequivocally between project success or failure. This realist view in project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009, Patzak & Rattay 2004, Kerzner 2009) further encouraged me to assume a linear causality between the application of methods and the achievement of outcomes. I believed that my projects could be controlled by simply applying the right methods and tools in the right way.

However, my professional experience could not confirm the realist assumptions commonly underlying the conception of project management. Although I became a highly certified expert in project management, the theories that I applied did not inevitably lead to project success, nor were they sufficient to predict or even control the outcomes of my projects. My increasing doubts were confirmed by many studies conducted on project success that asserted that technology-driven change projects failed more often than they succeeded despite an increasing adoption of contemporary project management theories in the past 20 years (Standish Group 2013)[12].

I started to suspect that people themselves might be the root of the problem in projects, as I increasingly experienced projects as battlefields for conflicting stakeholder interests ('corporate jungles' Morgan 2006) and as generating all kinds of resistance to change. I questioned the practicality of the assumption that project teams always work together in harmonious ways, as too often I found myself caught up in a chaotic tangle of coalition and collusion-building and emotional defence mechanisms. I could simply no longer hold on to the rational assumptions underlying the prescriptions of the project management theories.

[12] The Standish Group International, Inc. is an independent international research advisory firm, producing an yearly report (Chaos Report) about the success and failure rates of IT projects. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standish_Group. Accessed March 2018.

This encouraged me to increasingly focus on the human factor. I studied organisational theories dealing with the informal structures in organisations (Kühl & Moldaschl 2010) or considering organisations as systems of humans ('Personale Systemtheorie', König & Volmer 2008, based on Gregory Bateson's systems theory) that produce recurring behavioural patterns which need to be managed. In a master's programme on managing change, I came across more people-centred theories such as behaviourism (Watson 1960), or Kotter's (1996) theory on change management, or the psychodynamic school of thought (Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert 2008 and Amado & Ambrose 2001). All these theories focused on how to deal with people's resistance to change and find leverage points to reduce these resistances in ways judged favourable to achieve the intended project results.

Although providing interesting insights, I found these theories to focus mainly on individual behaviours and how to influence people to adopt a certain conduct regarded as more efficient for achieving project outcomes. I noticed how the impact of the social interactions from which these behaviours occur were largely overlooked. Furthermore, I considered these people-centred theories to still be based on the same individual conception of human agency than the more task-centred traditional project management theories. Both assume that someone, usually a manager or a consultant, is able to analyse the situation from outside and find ways to control what is going on in a situation, with the only distinction that one focuses on project deliverables while the other aims to control the human factor. In contradiction to this, I rarely found myself able to control project deliverables or people in such a determined way.

It is through my long-standing search for reliable answers to these conflicts between theory and practice that I became increasingly aware of the limitations of the rational and linear assumptions underlying a realist ontology. I noticed how, through this way of thinking, we seem to be caught up in a dualist understanding of our world, where projects can only be either a success or a failure, where managers are either in control or out of control, once involved in the events and then detaching from them to be able to analyse and redesign them. In this understanding of the world, power, emotions and human agency are solely located in individuals, but the effects of social phenomena on individuals are ignored. It is this tendency to rule out the conflicts that we experience in our daily practice with others by using simplified "either…or" categorisations that seems to be insufficient for explaining what I experienced in the events described in this research project.

I concluded that I would like to build on a more complex understanding, able to see my world as both predictable and unpredictable, controllable and uncontrollable, involved and detached, all at the same time.

Research Project 2

Project Management - a Road to Success?

In this second research project I built on the insights from the reflexive autobiography presented in my first research project to further explore the discrepancies between the realist hypotheses underlying contemporary project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009) and my experiences in project management practice.

In my narrative, I presented one of my projects in which there was a conflict centred around the question of whether it was a success or a failure. At the beginning of the project, we ensured that there could be no doubt about this judgement by thoroughly defining the scope of the project and nailing down the criteria required to measure and determine its success. At the end of the project, we had managed to fulfil these seemingly objective criteria and thus, from a realist perspective, this project should have been considered successful. Nevertheless, when the project close-down meeting took place, the verdict from the project customers was unfavourable.

This experience made me doubt the claims made by project management theories that project success is a straightforward and static concept, where the project outcome can easily be categorised as a success or a failure. I increasingly challenged that the realist assumptions underlying this concept of project success and failure, which may have proved valuable for natural phenomena were easily projectable onto social events. This led me to explore what it means to define project success in practice and draw on ontological assumptions which might better suit to explain my experience.

Project Success - a Concept to Difficult Grasp

I first started my research on this topic by exploring the realist assumptions underlying the concept of project success as we tend to define it in project management. From this perspective, it is assumed that project success can be represented by unambiguous success criteria as if it were something that objectively existed and could be given clear and static labels in the form of a date, a budget figure and a list of features to be delivered at a certain quality. In project management theories (Atkinson 1999:341, Jugdev & Müller 2005:20) such a conceptualisation of project success as being composed of time,

cost and scope, is commonly known as the 'iron triangle', a term that I think perfectly illustrates this assumption of a rigid concept.

This perspective also assumes that project success criteria can be predicted right from the start of the project by independent and objective individuals who may achieve harmonious agreements by using a rational approach that they communicate in a transparent way (sender-receiver model (Shannon & Weaver 1963)). It is further assumed that this success criteria can be imposed on others and that any potential resistance can be dealt with. These assumptions also guided us in the narrative when the key stakeholders sat together to define what success meant for this project. Although we were aware of the historically difficult relationship between the business and IT departments, and their suspicion towards each other, we still acted as if we could harmoniously define what would be considered a success in the next eighteen months.

These assumptions mainly build on a systemic understanding of projects. Project management scholars (Patzak & Rattay 2004:33, Garel 2013:665, Kerzner 2009:38) tend to define project management as managing human systems, consisting of subsystems which are formed to a harmonious whole. This view leads to the perception of projects as mechanical entities. This draws on Stacey's (2011:71) understanding of 'cybernetic systems', which he defines as goal-seeking and closed control systems where success is seen as a state of 'stability, consistency and harmony'. From such a viewpoint, project success criteria may be regarded as a reification of project success in the form of static targets which often become an end in themselves, as if the project were a system developing a dynamic of its own and striving towards pre-set goals.

In my narrative for this research project, I described how this static conception of project success led us to ignore anything which didn't fit into this rigid scheme and instead compelled us to stubbornly follow the route that had been set at the beginning of the project. We avoided the conflicts that arose from this strict understanding of project results, which presented themselves in the form of resistance to change and conflicting interests. We preferred to ignore these signs and obstinately continue in a way that I experienced as a pseudo-efficient busyness, as if we collectively agreed to pass over a problem whilst being fully aware that this problem would catch up with us sooner or later.

I concluded that this phenomenon was mainly related to the fact that we tend to rely on the rational assumptions that come with realist and systemic ways of thinking. I believe

that this approach inspired us to focus on abstract success criteria and led us to ignore the intricacies of the project.

Project Success as a Complex Social Process

I therefore drew on another way of thinking, building upon the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin, Shaw 2000, Stacey 2011, Griffin 2002, Mowles 2015a), which does not perceive human practice as developing through the rational choices made by some individuals or through the self-forming tendencies of ominous systems, but rather understanding outcomes as being the result of many local interactions of interdependent individuals. Such a view requires other ontological assumptions which conceive human practice to evolve as a continuous process rather than a static system, where meaning-making develops through intersubjective conflicts rather than through harmonious wholes.

To explain process thinking I used Elias's (1997) theory of the civilising processes and its underlying understanding of human development. He sees societal development as a long-term, continuous social process evolving from many dialectical interactions between individuals. His theory of process thinking thus embraces the contradiction between the individual and the social, assuming that it is in these conflictual interactions that the individual forms the group while at the same time being formed by it, and as such 'the individual and the group are the singular and the plural of the same phenomenon, namely, human relating' (Griffin 2002:10).

Understanding meaning to evolve from a continuous process of human interactions has numerous implications for the conceptualisation of project success. From a process perspective, human agency is not seen as the linear result of co-existing but independent individual and structural influences, but rather emerges from their paradoxical interplay. Following this logic, project success then emerges from the same complex social interactions in the form of a continuous process and cannot be seen as an objective judgement based on eternally true success criteria.

This also suggests that the process of defining project success is in constant flux and always in a state of becoming (Elias 1997, Langley et al. 2013). The process therefore does not seek a state of stable equilibrium as suggested by the "iron triangle", a concept commonly adopted in project management theories. The definition of project success is thus not a one-shot exercise but should rather be understood as the outcome of a

continuous social process where the definition of success and failure is constantly evolving throughout the project and even beyond it. This continuous reinterpretation of what success meant for the various stakeholders became obvious in my narrative when a couple of months after the project finished the power dynamics in the company changed. This led the same people who had given me a thumbs-down at the project close-down meeting to suddenly find the project results helpful for achieving their department interests and they thus claimed it to be a major success.

Another implication of process thinking is that there is no way to step out of this process[13]. Contrary to the assumption made by the systems approach that individuals may determine the system from outside, in Elias' process theory human development cannot be designed from outside this process (Elias 1997). This assumption led me to conclude that the definition of project success criteria is not the work of some privileged stakeholders who may define for all what success and failure means in each specific case. They may be more powerful in these discussions than others and thus may have more opportunities to influence this process, but they are definitely not able to fully control it. The numerous interests and aspirations of those participating in one form or another in the project also affect the meaning of project success and failure, and these various influences cannot be predicted, designed and controlled from outside the process by a few powerful people.

Another fundamental difference between these views is the underlying time structure. Systems thinking assumes a linear understanding of time (Mowles 2015a:101), where the present is independent from the past and the future (Griffin, 2002:184), leading to the belief that we are able to define objective success criteria free from any past experiences or from any expectations of the future. In contrast, process thinking perceives social interactions to transcend 'the past through the present and beyond it into the future', presuming that the 'meaning of past events is to be found in […] the present' (Elias, 1997:357). The process of meaning-making is thus a reconstruction of past experiences in the context of the present moment and influenced by our aspirations of the future (Stacey, 2011:319).

[13] In research project 4, I used the "stream" metaphor from Griffin (2002) to explain this concept of process. From this view, we cannot just stand beside the stream or float on it, trying to stay afloat, as if we were separate from the stream. Rather, we are part of the stream and immersed in its continuous dynamic. In practice, this means that we are not detached observers just interacting with others and able to analyse what they do from outside of it. As practitioners we "are" the practice that we are involved in, affecting it and being affected by it at the same time.

Applying this understanding of temporality onto the notion of project success led me to the conclusion that it cannot be seen as an objective definition independent of the present context. Neither can it be considered irrespective of any prejudices resulting from past experiences or of any future expectations from those intervening in this process. Project success, therefore, is not a static and timeless thing that is valid in the same way in any moment of time.

From a processual view, the static concept of project success as we lived it in my narrative for this research project cannot be sustained and is unable to explain what we actually experienced in our narrative. Our negotiations of project success were heavily influenced by the historically bad relationships between the IT and user departments, and I was influenced by my fears of failure as I felt pressure from the CIO to succeed in this project independently of the level of support provided by those involved on the business side. My boss, the CIO, was motivated by his own perspective of his career, and whether he would be able to support the CEO's strategic needs, and the COO, feeling his future at risk, intervened through his subordinates in these discussions to protect what he believed to be in danger. As the power structures, motivations and intentions of each actor in this process changed over time, so did our perception of project success.

However, the fact that the definition of project success is continuously shifting, and thus cannot be reliably predicted, does not mean that anything can happen in projects. As illustrated in my previous example, what defines success is influenced by the various conflicting intentions and motivations of those involved, and thus not anything can arise from this process. This led me to conclude that project success is predictable and unpredictable at the same time.

There is thus nothing wrong in defining project success criteria at the start of a project, as long as it is understood to be merely a snapshot of what success means in a specific moment of time for some people. It starts to become problematic when these criteria are perceived to be predictable by some people and considered to be a rigid reification of what the project should achieve. As demonstrated in my narrative, these rigid definitions then often become a self-fulfilling prophecy and an end in themselves. Changing our ontological assumptions may redirect our focus from simply attempting to achieve these fixed targets to considering what we actually do, and thus making a more meaningful contribution to our way of working together in projects.

Research Project 3

Project Management - an Illusion of Control?

Contemporary project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009) usually justify the usage of project management methodologies by their ability to cope with 'unique' circumstances which cannot be dealt with by the business-as-usual structures of daily business operations (PMI 2013:12, Prince2 2009:3–4, IPMA 2010:27). It is commonly assumed that these uncertain situations require a special form of management (Patzak & Rattay 2004: 29) characterised by dedicated, multi-disciplinary teams, flexible structures and specific methods and tools to control outcomes. The project management discipline has thus become a synonym for controlling such risky ventures.

Over the years, I adopted this rational approach, and applying it as a way of controlling uncertain situations became second nature to me. It even informed my behaviour in personal situations of uncertainty, as became dramatically obvious to me in the way I reacted when my father was diagnosed with leukaemia. I did what I usually do in anxiety-provoking situations, mainly focusing on fixing the problem by using a rational approach. In this case it meant organising his treatment with the doctors and nurses and taking back control over his blood parameters. I considered his daily blood test results as a means of judging the effectiveness of his treatment, as key performance indicators, that should allow me to monitor the performance of the doctors and nurses.

Of course, I was aware that my approach would not be able heal my father, but this situation quite impressively demonstrates my tendency to over-rationalise situations where I feel uncertain or even anxious, and illustrates how I focused solely on the methods being applied, as if they were the most important thing to care about in this situation.

In the narrative that I drew on in this research project I showed similar tendencies. I was called to consult for a customer in order to recover a crisis project that they had not been able to bring under control for more than two years. It was a risky contract and I presumed that their problems must be deeply rooted and could not just be fixed by applying some methods and tools. Still, the first thing I did was exactly that: I trusted my project management methods to bring things back under control. For some time this

seemed to work, and we managed to achieve some major milestones. However, this progress proved to be treacherous; as soon the prevailing department egoisms, conflicting interests and resistances began to flare up again, a new crisis had surfaced.

This made me doubt the claim made by project management theories that a rational approach provides control over projects and their results. In management literature this linear relationship between methods and outcomes is also challenged. I drew on scholars from diverse traditions such as Mintzberg (1994), Cicmil & Hodgson (2006), Flyvbjerg (2004), Flyvbjerg & Richardson (2002), Fineman & Sturdy (1999) and Stacey (2012), all who come to the same conclusion that the tools and methods of management may create an illusion of control, but do not necessarily provide control over outcomes. They suspect other reasons for this tendency to rationalise uncertain situations and conclude that controlling people may be one of them.

Control - A Powerful Gesture

These scholars understand rational control not as a neutral process simply directed at achieving specific outcomes, but rather as biased towards particular results favoured by those trying to control the situation. So, for example, the masterplan that I proposed cannot only be understood as a means of delivering the project; the phased implementation strategy that it involved was above all an attempt to provide quick wins and thus demonstrate my ability to deliver to my client. This was despite my full awareness that this would put additional pressure on the team and thus potentially increase their resistance.

I concluded that rational control is always ‘penetrated by power’ (Flyvbjerg & Richardson 2002:50) and that any act of rational control must also be seen as a powerful move by the ones trying to exercise this control. Power should not, however, be understood as being simply located in autonomous individuals able to choose the right strategies to make other individuals do things that they would otherwise not have done. People do not simply do what we expect them to do, as also became obvious in my narrative, when the various department interests torpedoed my plans. Although I managed to impose some of my ideas in the planning workshops, using my expertise as a powerful means to leverage my intentions, they increasingly resisted my approach for various reasons.

In Elias's (1997:356–360) terms, power is a characteristic of human relationships and he understands human development to occur in 'power figurations', in the form of a network of human relationships where, as various agents interact, they mutually enable and constrain each other. These local power figurations form, through a historical process, wider social patterns which, in turn, enable and constrain the individuals to act in predisposed ways. As a consultant, this means that I was engaging in a continuous process of formal and informal negotiations where we mutually conditioned each other. Although I significantly influenced this process, I never really controlled it.

These methods of rational control do, however, still have a disciplining effect in more general terms. I built on the French philosopher Foucault (1977, 1982) to show how these methods and tools have become 'institutionalized techniques of discipline' (Stacey 2012:85) affecting a wider population. The disciplining effects that project management methods and tools may have on project teams are socially constructed and constitute 'a code of normalisation' leading to the development of regulated and concerted structures of control around the activities of people, making them work and behave in certain ways considered beneficial for projected outcomes. In this sense, the masterplan that we agreed upon became a means of disciplining. It became, once approved, a kind of officially accepted norm of how this project should be run, and deviating from this norm was likely to have significant consequences for all of us. Such methods thus become mechanisms to control people through 'the use of simple instruments of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments and examination' (Foucault 1977:170).

I concluded that the disciplining effects thus result simultaneously from institutionalised patterns and intentional and interest-driven actions, both mutually forming each other. In Elias' and Foucault's terms, power is therefore a relational concept rather than an individual one, and power relations are 'rooted deep in the social nexus' (Foucault 1982:791).

These reflections led me to rethink my understanding of project control and conceive it not only to be a means of achieving control over outcomes, but also an attempt to control people. Not, however, in the sense that a single person could determine what other people should do. I rather conceive an act of control as a powerful gesture which is part of a complex social process and thus only one of many gestures in the network of human relationships where people mutually enable and constrain each other. What comes out of these powerful interactions is not reliably foreseeable or controllable by anyone, but this does not mean that anything can happen and that we do not control anything; we still

have some influence through our powerful gestures, but definitely not in the sense of the total control paradigm underlying the project management theories. It is in these enabling and constraining social interactions that we are in control and not in control, all at the same time.

This left me with the question of what other purpose this obstinate striving for rational control may serve. If it neither fulfils the promise for controlling specific outcomes, nor provides reliable control over people to make them do what we would like them to do, why do we still stick to this way of thinking?

I suspected that there must be another way to explain the tendency to rationalise our practice, namely the emotions that the uncertain nature of projects give rise to.

Control and Emotions

In my narratives, I described how I often experienced emotions driving my need for rational control: the fear of failure, or the shame and humiliation when I didn't feel recognised as the expert that I wanted to be, or the anger that I felt when people did not comply with my advice. It is this amalgam of emotions that I suspected played an important role in the control patterns that I, and I assume other people too, often show in these situations.

Elias (1956, 1987, 2001) explains this relationship by the fact that situations perceived as uncontrollable tend to provoke strong emotions in humans. Over the course of evolution, humans have learned to deal with anxiety-provoking natural events by taking a detached rational stance, allowing humanity to gain greater control over nature and thus providing an increasing feeling of security in the face of uncontrollable natural events. This has led to a widely accepted appreciation of rational approaches, even for social phenomena. I showed very similar tendencies in my narratives, as I fell back on well-known patterns as I tried to rationalise emotional situations. From these experiences, I concluded that my rational behaviour above all served to control my emotions, rather than controlling outcomes or other people.

Scholars such as Fineman & Sturdy (1999), Fineman (2004), Simpson & Marshall (2010), Streatfield (2001), Mintzberg (1994) concluded from their research that the dissemination of rational control has led control-oriented theories to consider emotions as distorting our cognitive abilities and thus as hindering rational thinking. Ironically, it seems that it

may be that the emotions which these rational theories tend to undermine trigger a reliance on rational and thus seemingly emotion-free control mechanisms.

When it comes to controlling emotions, these theories either focus their attention on the bodily expressions of emotion which good leaders should be able to sense and act upon by using the appropriate leadership styles (psychometric theories (Goleman 2011)), or they concentrate on controlling social defence mechanisms shown by groups, in the form of over-rationalised procedures or organisational rituals as a response to anxiety-provoking situations (psychodynamic theories (Menzies 1960, Vansina & Vansina 2008, Amado & Ambrose 2001, Hirschhorn 1990). Despite having a different focus, both schools of thought build on very similar assumptions. They take for granted that emotions are an individual concept that result from the linear interplay between body and mind, in an internal sequential process of stimulus-response (i.e. external trigger - generation of emotions - expression of feelings), and therefore assume that emotions can be exploited to avoid certain behaviours not considered beneficial in certain situations.

Dewey (1896b), Elias (1987a), Burkitt (2014) and Simpson & Marshall (2010) reject this dualism of body and mind which underlies theories with an individualistic understanding of the emotional process. Dewey (1896b) claims that these dualist theories rely on an outdated 'reflex arc' concept building upon an artificial separation between feeling, thinking and acting (ibid:358) and interacting in a linear cause and effect relationship. Instead, these scholars rather understand cognition and emotion to be part of the same social process, inseparably related and mutually conditioning each other in paradoxical ways, and thus perceive it as a non-linear whole act of stimuli and response.

They furthermore perceive expressions of emotions as a means of communication, and thus emotions are always manifested in relation to others. Although body and mind are part of this act, the emotional process cannot be limited just to this bodily operation. Simpson & Marshall (2010) draw on the American pragmatist Mead to emphasise the social character of emotions. They use his communication theory to present emotions as the outcome of the social act of gesturing and responding, and thus as emerging from the tensions that result from the differences in interpretation of meaning in the communication process.

Building on this social and non-linear understanding of emotions, I concluded that emotion and rational control are inseparably related. Our need for rational control can be seen as a response to the uncertainties that we face in our lives, as we are compelled to

act in rational ways in order to control our emotions. I think that these responses to anxiety-provoking situations also trigger our need for controlling outcomes and people.

Considering the inherently social character of the concepts of power and emotions and conceiving human relationships as being constituted of a network of powerful and emotion-driven social gestures underlines the complex nature of human development. This way of conceiving human development leads me to understand the concept of control in a more subtle way, no longer adopting a dualist "either … or" assumption of being either in control or out of control, but rather perceiving control to continuously shift in power-laden and emotion-driven social acts by mutually conditioning actors. This therefore provides a paradoxical sensation of being both in control and not in control at the same time.

Research Project 4:

Project Management - a Methodology Ruling Practice?

In my previous research projects I pointed to the conflicts between the realist understanding underpinning most project management theories and how in practice I struggled to confirm this view and started to understand project management practice in less dualistic and more complex terms.

In this research project, I continued in this direction by exploring what it means to engage in my client's practice as a consultant in project management. From the viewpoint of traditional project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009), project practice may be described as a set of methods and tools that are applied independently of the context. When I tried to describe what I do when engaging in my clients' projects in the narrative for this research project, I noticed how I reproduced these abstract terms and provided a rather detached account of what we do when engaging in practice.

I wondered why it is so difficult to describe practice and concluded, building on scholars such as Wittgenstein (1968), Chia & McKay (2007) Gherardi (2009), Feldman & Orlikowski (2011) and Bourdieu (1990), that what is missing in my description are those things in practice that we take for granted, things that we do without knowing that we do them and which escape our attention.

This leads to the problem that we tend to take what is left from those abstract depictions of practice as facts, and thus make this limited account of practice appear as if it were something that physically existed and can therefore be described, duplicated and taught to others. Practice then appears as having a meaning independent of its context, which may lead, according to Shotter (2006), to disengaged and uninvolved modes of relating with our social environment.

In my narrative I described such a situation. I was hired by a client to implement a new project management methodology for a running project. I outlined how I do what I always do in such cases, namely, explaining the new methodology, negotiating a way to

implement the new procedures and tools with the project team, and trying to make sure that they adopt the measures as explained. While dealing with the project as if it were a system that I could design at will, I noticed that on the one hand my intervention appeared to the client team as abstract and detached from their way of working. I ignored the overall context and history which made it difficult for them to comply with the new methods, for example, when I relentlessly requested for them to take on responsibility for their project deliverables in a context where blame and recriminations were recurring themes on their organisation's agenda. On the other hand, their way of working often appeared unprofessional and even absurd from my perspective as an experienced project management professional, for example, in the way that they managed a substantial project without seeing the need for having a plan or dedicated project structures, or how they dealt with the project in a way that I perceived as very hands-off and detached from the project deliverables.

This led me to question how to engage with my client's environment in a more meaningful way for both the client and myself. Therefore, in this research project I intended to get a deeper understanding of what practice is, how it develops and how theory, in the form of methods and tools, and practice are related.

Definition of Practice

Drawing on practice theorists such as Feldman & Orlikowsky (2011), Chia & McKay (2007), Schatzki (2005), Gherardi (2009), Chia & Holt (2006), Chia (1996), Shotter (2006), I described practice as being formed through continuous human activities that unfold in intersubjective relationships. I concluded that practice can only be understood 'from within' these activities and that it requires engaged and responsive thinking (Shotter 2006:594). This conception of practice made me turn to Heidegger's theory of 'being-in-the-world' ('Dasein' Heidegger (1962:78)) to better understand the role of involvement in practice.

In Heidegger's terms, being involved in practice may be described as an 'absorbed' engagement in everyday actions (Heidegger 1962:107) that we routinely perform without conscious consideration of what we do. From a project management standpoint, I understand Heidegger's theory of 'being-in-the-world' to mean that project practice can no longer be considered as just driven by detached methods and tools that simply need to be implemented independently of the social environment in which these projects take

place. Rather, I conceive projects to materialise in the routine everyday activities in which project deliverables unfold through people's involvement in project practice.

I turned to Bourdieu (1990) and Dewey (1922) and their respective theories on 'habitus' and 'habits', to emphasise the role of social structures in the development of practice. Both see the development of practice as being largely driven by a 'system of disposition' (Bourdieu 1990:59) that produces sustainable tendencies to act. For Dewey, these predispositions serve an efficient and routine execution of practice, though not in the sense of mechanical repetitions, but rather as triggering a 'sensitiveness' to certain impulses, preferences and aversions (Dewey 1922:28).

However, this habitual and unconscious way of working also blinded me to what was going on around me. Everything that hindered my routine work from functioning was considered as inefficient and thus I preferred to ignore even the most obvious signs of resistance such as the strategic collusions that the participants built during the planning workshops or their evasive argumentation to counter my proposals. Dewey (1992:82) explains this phenomenon by the fact that habits not only allow routine work to function, but they are also persistent and self-reinforcing and thus resistant to change. I imagine this also explains their reluctance to change their practice when confronted with a new methodology.

Practice - an Individual and a Social Thing

Seeing the development of practice as mainly determined by social structures, in the form of habits, made me wonder about my role as a consultant in this process and question how my expertise adds value to it.

Dewey states that a 'certain delicate combination' of habitual tendencies and individual stimuli is required to explain human comportment and both need to interplay to be able to adjust to the various circumstances that we face in our social environments. In this sense, he supports a similar view to Elias' theory on the development of societies that I mentioned in the previous research project, seeing the individual and the social structures as part of the same process of meaning-making, and thus he argues that the individual forms the social, while at the same time is being formed by it.

From this complex perspective, my expertise is itself nothing other than a historically and socially constructed propensity to act. It is the outcome of my involvement in many

past social practices where I applied various methods and tools, leading me to understand and conduct my consulting job in certain predisposed ways, that in my narrative I came to recognise as something that I do without thinking about how I do it, something that felt second nature to me and made me feel in my element. This may explain my tendency to ask people in my projects to take over responsibility for their project deliverables or to use planning workshops as a technique to discuss and produce an overall project plan.

Each time that I engage in a new practice, these methods and techniques need then to be re-contextualised through 'situational discriminations' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 2005:786) and thus reproduce together a new habituated practice. These contextual choices, which Dreyfus & Dreyfus (2005:779) call 'intuitive judgments', are a set of rules of thumb that form part of my expertise and materialise through unconscious habitual responses when applying the methods and tools in various situations[14]. Following Heidegger's theory of 'being-in-the-world', these judgements can only be learned through involvement in practice, as it is only in the emotional experience of practice itself that we gradually build up these intuitions of how to respond to the multitude of circumstances that we face.

Practice is thus driven by detached individual impulses and socially constructed habits which are both responsible for the development of practice in a complex relationship. In order to understand how the detached and involved modes of engagement relate to each other, I used Heidegger's notion of 'breakdown' (Dreyfus 1995:70) and Dewey's concept of practice reproduction (Dewey 1922:113–118).

The Notion of 'Breakdown'

Both Heidegger and Dewey, although coming from different ontological traditions, have very similar explanations for the interrelation of both modes of engagement, i.e. reflective detachment and involved practicing. They see these modes of encountering our world as related through surprising moments that suspend habituated practice and invite contemplation. These disturbances then lead individuals to think about what they do and how they can find new ways to overcome the disruption they feel from their practice (Dewey 1922:117; Heidegger 1962:107; Dreyfus 1995:68–69).

[14] Expertise is thus conceived in the sense of Aristotle's concept of 'phronesis', as a 'practical knowledge' or a 'tacit skill', and thus emphasising the knowledge of real cases (Flyvbjerg 2006:371–372).

In my narrative, I felt such disruptions from my practice when I noticed that some members of the project team did not adopt the methods that we agreed upon or when they avoided me during my visits. These situations caused me to pause and reflect on what I thought was going on and how I could address it.

Dewey (1922) interprets these surprises as normal interruptions of practice which require conscious 'readjustments', as an invitation to engage in doubt and inquiry which may contribute to the reproduction of a new practice. In his view (Dewey 1896b), thinking and acting are inseparable and mutually interrelated, and thus form an 'entire act' (ibid: 366) where experience develops continuously in the form of an evolving process. A breakdown from practice thus results in a thoughtful act emerging from action, as part of one and the same process of meaning-making, where both thought and action inform each other at the same time, thus contributing to the reproduction of a new experience (Dewey 1896b: 358, 360, 363, 366).

I found these moments of reflection to be quite disruptive and emotional, and I wondered about the role of emotions in these moments of breakdown. As already mentioned in my third research project, Elias (1987b) explains these emotions as being the result of the loss of control that such disruptive moments in practice can produce, and claims that it is difficult to detach oneself from situations of overwhelming emotions. I could retrace this claim, as I found it more difficult to reflect when I was still emotionally engaged in practice, for example, in the difficult meeting with one of the team leaders (i.e. Martha), whereas with the benefit of hindsight, it was easier to make sense of what I experienced in this meeting and to challenge my own responsibility in the situation.

The Role of Reflections

This does not mean, however, that detached and thus less emotional reflections are "better" reflections in the sense that they will necessarily lead to better results. Burkitt (2012) even sees emotions as the main motives for reflective thought and claims that reflections are as much an emotional as a rational act. I believe that this view conforms to Heidegger's and Dewey's understanding, in that reflections are always part of an emotional experience of a breakdown from involved practice. This leads me to conclude that any reflections that do not result from such an emotional experience of a breakdown

from engaged practice must be rather detached from what goes on in practice, and I wonder what such reflections would be able to contribute to this practice.

This also leads me to conclude that reflections are nothing more than any other action in this complex social process. They are part of the same non-linear process which we are involved in and in which we experience the breakdowns leading to these reflections, that in turn inform practice in non-negligible but uncertain ways; there is no way of 'doubling' this process (Stacey 2011:338).

The reflections after the meeting with Martha describe this process effectively. On my journey back home, I was still under the impression this emotional meeting with her. The reflections in this detached moment while driving home were still part of the whole situation in which I was involved, and which caused the experience of a breakdown. These reflections then resulted in intentions which informed my actions the following week when engaging back into practice with my client, probing my reflections and leading to new breakdowns, doubts and inquiries. It in this spiral process of detachment and involvement that practice is continuously reproduced into something that no single person can reliably determine.

I concluded from all this that practice is not fully understandable through theory and is not a static thing that we can shape at will, as often assumed in traditional project management theories. Rather, I now understand practice as arising from the continuously evolving social process of detached involvement.

4. Critical Evaluation

of the Research in Light of the Overarching Theme

Project Management - a Dualist Concept

In my first research project, an experiential autobiography, I mentioned that I was educated in a western scientific tradition, taking for granted that my world is a reality that just needed to be discovered and believing that I could do the right things and that I could do them right.

Over the years, I began to challenge the realist assumptions underlying contemporary project management theories (PMI 2013; IPMA 2010; Prince2 2009; Agile Alliance Organisation 2001) as they simply did not correlate with what I was experiencing in practice.

This led me to describe in my second research project how I struggled with the firm distinction between project success and failure that project management theories tend to make. I challenged the notion that project success can easily be determined by defining unambiguous project success criteria at the start of the project. Drawing on the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, I illustrated that the meaning of project success is continuously renegotiated between the participants in an endless historical and social process determined by co-existing and mutually conditioning social and individual influences. What comes out of this process is somehow predictable, as it is the result of individual intentions and habitual behavioural patterns, and thus not 'anything goes' (Stacey 2011:382). What comes out of this process is still, at the same time, unknowable, as what results from the complex nexus of individual and social influences cannot be reliably foreseen through the definition of rigid success criteria. I concluded that a subtler conception of project success is required where the meaning of success is continuously evolving in predictably unpredictable ways.

In my third research project, I continued my quest for a better understanding of the complexities that I was experiencing in my daily practice and challenged the "total control" paradigm underlying most project management theories. I mentioned how, in a crisis project, I experienced the control of outcomes as an illusionary concept. I noticed that this desperate striving for control should rather be seen as an attempt to impose interests on others and is mainly triggered by the emotions provoked when facing uncertainties that we do not feel we have under control. From this, I concluded that acts of control are power-laden and emotion-charged social acts in which people

continuously and mutually enable and constrain each other. It is through this complex social process that we are both in control and not in control at the same time.

Over the course of my research, I became increasingly aware that my previous convictions could not sustain the complexities which I had experienced in my project life, and this prompted me to reflect in my fourth research project on how, as a consultant, I could engage in my client's practice under these circumstances. I described the detached way in which I tried to implement a project management methodology, focusing mainly on theoretical models and rigid concepts and ignoring the particularities of their practice. In doing so, I took on a mode of engagement that valued detached thinking over involved acting. I concluded from this research that practice is not simply the result of detached reflection, but that it emerges from the conflictual interplay between detached reflections and absorbed involvement, as two modes of engagement being part of the same complex social process.

I now see how, for many years, my actions and behaviours reflected a realist way of thinking. I understood my world as being constructed of simple categories, e.g., either being predictable or unpredictable, either being in or out of control, or being detached from or involved in practice. I increasingly began to perceive this "either…or" concept as unrealistic as it did not conform to what I lived in practice.

My research narratives problematised these assumptions: although our projects usually contained clear objectives and plans leading us in a particular direction, the projects always seemed to take an unexpected and unforeseeable turn. I had never felt fully in control with how my interventions in the project were translated in the complex network of social interactions, but neither did I feel completely out of control. And although I favoured a detached analytical approach to lead my projects, my decisions were often influenced by the tensions resulting from my deep involvement in the power-driven and emotion-laden interrelations going on in projects.

I claim that these conflictual tensions cannot be ignored or resolved just to abstract what we cannot really grasp, as in the traditional project management theories (IPMA 2010, PMI 2013, Prince2 2009, Agile Alliance Organisation 2001) with their realist assumptions based on objectivity, predictability and the linearity of cause and effect.

They appear to rely on a Newtonian understanding, as if projects were mechanical systems where the whole is the sum of its parts, and are thus largely based on 'rational,

calculating, objectifying methods of scientific enquiry' (Stacey 2011:51, Mowles 2015a:20). Such a scientific way of conceiving projects has led to an "either…or" thinking in project management theories which eliminates contradictions and conflicts. The way that I understood the themes described in my narratives for this research, i.e. project success, project control and the modes of engagements into project practice, illustrates such thinking.

Another major influence on project management can be traced back to Kant's "both… and" dualism. Building on Stacey's (2011:54) conclusions regarding the impact of Kant's dualist worldview on Western thinking, I recognise similar patterns in the dominant project management theories. Kant made a distinction between reality and the 'appearances' of it (Anderson 1990:60), thus allowing for both realist and relative ideas to co-exist. Kant adopted a dualistic view on natural systems in the form of a 'both… and' (Stacey 2011:51) thinking, which is prevalent throughout his theory (ibid:298). This led him to develop a systems thinking approach, which allows for the co-existence of 'determination and freedom', the former being located in organic systems where the final goal is already part of the system, as a 'mature form of itself' (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:57) and the latter in human beings, who, as autonomous individuals, are free to choose their actions (ibid:28–29).

By simply projecting this "both…and" interpretation onto human systems, it has found its way into contemporary management sciences and also into project management theories. Some project management professionals (Patzak & Rattay 2004, Kerzner 2009, Sutherland 2012)[15] see projects as if they were systems with self-organising tendencies, as if the parts forming the whole move to a final form already contained within the formative process that produces it. However, it is also accepted that, through rational choices ('rational causality'), autonomous individuals are able to intervene independently from the self-organising system, and steer it by defining objectives, rules and procedures (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw 2000:30–31, 38, Griffin 2002:5,206, Stacey 2011:50–51).

[15] For the purpose of my research, I do not draw a distinction between plan-driven (commonly labelled as "waterfall" approach) and agile project management methodologies. Although agile project management methodologies have some specific properties (iterative approach, self-managing teams, project leader as a process manager,…), I conclude that they build on similar systems assumptions to the plan-driven project management methodologies (cf. research project 2).

Kant does, however, caution against using this interpretation of natural systems for human systems also, as in these systems the observer is also a participant, simultaneously influencing the system and being influenced by it, and thus not free to choose (Stacey 2011:56). Nevertheless, this concept still prevails in contemporary project management theories and was also visible in my research projects. I explained that by organising, structuring and planning the projects as prescribed by the methodologies, and thus assembling the parts in a particular way to form a pre-given whole, the project would necessarily achieve the predesigned success criteria. However, it is also assumed that the project manager or consultant can control what is going on and intervene to bring things back on track in case of any deviation from this self-forming process.

Applying this dualist view to social systems thus presupposes that these systems are driven by both structural forces located in the social system and by rational choices made by independent human beings. Kant's concept thus does not eliminate conflict in a Newtonian manner by using "either…or" categories, but rather resolves it by allowing both to happen independently from each other, applied at different times or places. Griffin (2002:8–10) believes that it is in this kind of 'both…and' thinking that we '[lose] the tension between the individual and the group he belongs to' (Griffin 2002:8–10, Griffin and Shaw 2000:29, Stacey 2011:298).

I concluded that both dualist conceptions, "either…or" and "both…and", when applied to social systems, lead to precisely the abstract way of dealing with projects that made it so difficult for me in my fourth research project to describe what we actually do when engaging with projects. This made it problematic to align it with my experience of project management practice.

This became evident in all my narratives for this research. In research project two, we focused on achieving the rigid success criteria that we had defined at the beginning of the project, as if by reaching these we would provide the evidence to deliver what was requested. This reduction of the project results to a simple formula caused us to ignore everything else hindering us from achieving these criteria. In research project three, the project plan, once agreed upon, became the focal point of all project stakeholders and a means of disciplining the project team, the project manager and even myself. Any deviation from this plan was likely to lead to consequences, and so the plan hung over our heads like the proverbial sword of Damocles, causing us to respect this plan irrespective of what this meant for the people involved . Similarly, in research project four, the focus on implementing the new project methodology resulted in us being

primarily preoccupied with discussing how things should be done, and thus distracted from the conflicts of interests and resistance that this abstract approach provoked.

Griffin (2002:12) believes that by eliminating these tensions we do no longer see what is in front of us in our practice - precisely these conflictual tensions that we tend to avoid or ignore, in order to create the illusion of being able to control what is not really controllable. Griffin considers that such an abstraction of human interactions is too detached from our daily practice and calls for taking on a different kind of thinking where conflicts are not simply ruled out.

Dialectical Logic and Project Management

Hegel's Dialectic

Hegel, in his dialectical logic, takes a very different stance to systems thinking. He challenges the dualistic understanding with its "either…or" or "both…and" structures which eliminate or resolve contradictions. His dialectical logic preserves conflicts, as he believes that it is through conflictual processes that seemingly opposing concepts transcend into something unexpected and uncontrollable, and he thus emphasises the 'unity in difference' (Mowles 2015a:13,21,96), Stacey 2011:299–300).

Hegel does not conceive wholes as just being the sum of their parts, as in Newton's mechanical systems; neither does he consider the parts to be determined by a pre-given whole already embedded within the formative process that creates it, as in Kant's organic systems. He does not privilege either the parts or the whole, but rather recognises the conflictual relationship existing between the two, where, in a dialectical movement, the parts are being formed by the whole while at the same time they are forming it (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:31–32).

Hegel's paradigm of 'living experience as the paradox of movement' (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000:32) thus replaces Newton's or Kant's dualist paradigms by a "both…and" thinking where the opposing concepts happen at the same time and mutually influence each other to produce something new. This form of logic has far reaching consequences for our understanding of human development.

Projects as Processes of Consensual-Conflictual Social Interaction

In Hegel's dialectical logic, practice is not only designed by independent individuals, nor is it just the result of a self-organising system that is itself striving towards its final state. Hegel conceives human development as being socially constructed and emerging from the conflictual local interactions of human beings. Building on this logic means understanding human development as an evolutionary process of contradictions and reconciliations that give rise to always new contradictions (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:30–33; Mowles 2015a:21, Stacey 2011:299).

Elias (1997), a process sociologist, built on Hegel's process thinking to develop his theory of the evolution of societies. He does not conceive societal development as a system of humans in the form of a pre-conceived whole, but rather as a historical process. Elias believes that large social structures develop from many dialectical interactions between individuals in a continuous process, claiming that it is this interplay that leads to the emergence of social patterns that no one individual could have planned. He thus embraces the contradiction between the individual and the social involved in societal development, not claiming one to be dominant over the other, but rather assuming that 'the individual and the group are the singular and the plural of the same phenomenon, namely, human relating' (Griffin 2002:10).

This interaction between social and individual influences is also observable in my projects in the form of 'tendencies to act' resulting from many local dialectical interactions between individuals ('habits' Dewey (1922), 'habitus' Bourdieu (1990)). Projects are not simply executed through the application of theoretical and universal models specifying what needs to be done. Rather, what we do in projects is the result of socially constructed predispositions that determine the way that we tend to understand and do things. This also explains how defining success criteria at the start of the project had become a habit which we no longer challenged, or how I engaged in a crisis project using an approach which I felt had become second nature to me, or how I came to conceive responsibility-taking as a key trait of every project manager.

This understanding of how to run a project has evolved through years of involvement in various project practices, where, in a multitude of simultaneously enabling and constraining local interactions, habitual patterns have emerged which, in turn, have influenced individual actions, leading to the formation of new patterns. In the narrative

of the second research project, this mechanism influenced us to conceive project success criteria in a very rigid way; due to the historically difficult relationships between IT and user departments creating an atmosphere of deep mistrust, this rigid definition served to protect us from being blamed by the user departments for delivering useless IT solutions. This way of running projects by focusing on success criteria was thus the outcome of many historical conflictual interactions where we mutually enabled and constrained ourselves to develop a mode of operation that all parties could accept, willingly or not, in this political context.

From the outside, conducting projects in this way could be perceived as inefficient or even absurd, but it seemed perfectly natural to us. As I concluded in my fourth research project on the reproduction of practice (Dewey 1922:82), these habits had a function in that they allowed us to establish a routine way of working under the circumstances that we found ourselves in. However, due to its persistent and self-reinforcing nature, this habitual functioning became institutionalised and prevented us from challenging our accustomed ways of working.

This development of habitual patterns through intersubjective conflicts contradicts the assumption of balanced and stable systems that can be changed from the outside and brought into a new stable state as in Kurt Lewin's (1947) renowned three stage theory of change (unfreeze, change, refreeze). Elias (1997) does not conceive social life as being balanced and harmonious, but rather considers it to be in a constant state of becoming. From a processual view, it is questionable that anyone is able to detach themselves from this process in order to design and control it from the outside. Griffin (2002:148) supports this view by arguing that what is known emerges from social practice and can thus not simply be determined from outside this practice, as the subject, i.e. the person who knows, and the object, i.e. what is to be known, are part of the same inseparable process in which the subject is simultaneously detached and involved.

Understanding practice as a historical and ongoing process rather than as a stable system also shifts our understanding of time. In systems thinking, the time structure is sequential, and is simply seen as 'the linear predictability of before and after' (Griffin 2002:15), with the present considered to be independent from the past and the future. In contrast, in process thinking social interactions transcend 'the past through the present and beyond it into the future' (Elias, 1997:357), and the process of meaning-making is a reinterpretation of the past in the present in anticipation of the future (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:34–36, Stacey 2011:319).

How we defined project success in the second research project, or how we perceived control in the third research project, or how we negotiated the concept of responsibility-taking in the fourth research project, is, from this perspective, not simply an independent act in a single moment of time, but is rather informed by our past understanding of these concepts reinterpreted in the context of the present situation while being influenced by our expectations of the future.

Griffin (2002:15) refers to the term 'living present' to denote this moment of meaning-making, assigning to it a circular time-structure where our interpretations of the present, the past and the future mutually interact to form a new understanding, thus making this process 'the very essence of experience'.

Understanding the development of project practice as emerging from these endless dialectical interactions, in which individuals simultaneously constrain and enable each other, and thus generate, in a paradoxical movement, social patterns which inform the individual impulses that created them and where the meaning of things is continuously reinterpreted in a cyclic motion of time by subjects being simultaneously detached and involved in these local interactions, demonstrates the complex nature of the social process of practice development.

Project Management and the Logic of Paradox

Stacey, Griffin and Shaw recommend taking these paradoxical relationships more seriously, as they believe that they provide further insights into what is actually going on in our practice:

> *[…] if we find ways of understanding the unavoidably paradoxical nature of life, we may find the liveliness of acting in the tension. We believe that this way of understanding is to be found in our ordinary everyday lives in organizations, where we do in fact cope with paradox, one way or another, finding it frustrating and exciting.*
>
> *(Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:5)*

Stacey and his colleagues assert that the concept of paradox implies another form of thinking which allows for a more complex understanding of our world. They believe that paradoxes of practice are unavoidable, and call for a logic which allows these contradictions to persist in the process of meaning-making (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:30; Griffin 2002:143; Stacey 2011:36). I understand the paradoxes of practice to call for a logic of paradox. This is not, however, in the sense of a new tool or method to leverage its potential in order to become more efficient or achieve better results, as this would again mean ignoring the conflictual processes going on in practice, and would thus likely lead to exactly what we are trying to avoid, namely focusing on what should be done instead of trying to take what is going on in practice seriously (Mowles 2015a: 16).

In the past, I used the term "paradox" colloquially to denote things that I found absurd, without really having a clear definition of what it really meant. I certainly did not assign this concept with an important role in the development of project practice. My first encounter with the term in this context was when studying the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (cf. research project 2: Human relating as complex social processes). The founders of this theory, Ralph Stacey, Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw, consider that organisational life is pervaded by paradox, which they made a key assumption in their theory (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:5). This concept became increasingly relevant to me after the first research project as I gradually noticed my tendency to rely on a realist ontology, and realised that this way of understanding my world made me think in simple categories to avoid the uncertainties resulting from the conflictual tensions that I was confronted with in my daily work. I recognised that these tensions cannot be avoided as they are a natural part of the development of practice. Thus, I became interested in reflecting upon what it means to consider these tensions while trying to make sense of project practice. This is where paradox kicked in and became, for me, a synonym for a more complex understanding of project practice.

Therefore, in my research projects, I have described paradoxes that I felt to be relevant in my project management practice and which made me challenge the dualist assumptions dominating the project management theories (IPMA 2010, PMI 2013, Prince2 2009, Agile Alliance Organisation 2001). I questioned whether project outcomes really are predictable, and whether they can be controlled by linear concepts by taking a detached, and thus seemingly objective, stance. In practice, I perceived projects as too complex to be predictable, although I did not subscribe to the 'anything goes' interpretations either. I

often felt that I was not really in control, and yet responsible for getting things moving. I often found it difficult to detach myself from the lived experience, and still, detached reflections frequently provided new ways to engage in practice. This makes me increasingly believe that thinking in simple categories is not practical and that acknowledging the paradoxical tensions in project management practice may provide interesting insights into what actually goes on in this practice.

Mowles (2015a:13) defines paradox as a special form of conflict involving 'two mutually exclusive, self-referencing ideas which help define each other but negate each other both at the same time' (Mowles 2015a:13). So, not only are these forces co-existing opposites, but the one only exists through the other, meaning, for example, in the case of the paradox of detached involvement (cf. research project 4), that without involvement there would be nothing to detach from and vice versa. We need to know both concepts in order to be able to understand what they mean.

Admittedly, it may be difficult to accept that two contradicting concepts which appear perfectly logical when occurring in isolation can co-exist. It may seem to be against common-sense (i.e. para doxa (Mowles 2015a:13)) that a project can be predictable and unpredictable at the same time (cf. research project 2), or that one can be simultaneously in control and not in control (cf. research project 3), or, that someone can be detached from practice while also being absorbed in it (cf. research project 4). These propositions are difficult to align to scientific principles in Western culture, where conflicts are usually resolved by applying an "either…or" or "both…and" logic which emphasises one side and ignores the other, or removes the contradiction by reframing the problem either in space or in time (Stacey 2011:37; Mowles 2015a:42–43). This is also the kind of thinking which informed our understanding of success in the second research project. We believed that a project must be either a success or a failure, or that it may be successful for one group of people and a failure for another group, but never at the same time.

Besides the antagonist nature of a paradox, another of its distinguishing features is that the two opposed elements continuously and mutually influence each other. I have already explored these properties of paradoxes in my research on the paradox of detached involvement (cf. research project 4) and it may serve as a good example here.

I have described how practice only develops through the paradoxical interplay of detached and involved modes of engagement and concluded that detaching from involved practice occurs as the result of a disruption ('surprise' Dewey 1922,

'breakdown' Heidegger 1962), in the form of an unexpected occurrence from an emotional experience of involvement in practice. These unexpected events disturb our habitual involvement and lead us to doubt and inquire about what we do and how to continue in our practice. The outcome of these detached reflections can only become meaningful when probing what we concluded from our reflections in the emotional participation within practice. Dewey (1922) claims that a 'certain delicate combination' (ibid:116) of both modes of engagement is required. This combination happens in a continuous and non-linear flux of involvement, interruptions, reflections and reconstruction of practice.

This led me to conclude that both opposed modes of engagement, detachment and involvement, not only mutually exclude and define themselves, but are also interdependent in a paradoxical relationship, as they both mutually inform each other. I can therefore understand them to be paradoxically related in the sense of Mowles' definition of paradox.

These paradoxical relationships have the potential to lead to something new, though not necessarily to something better. Mowles (2015a), building on Hegel's dialectical theory, conceives the process of contradictions and reconciliation as being an evolutionary process from which a new practice emerges. This is not in the sense of replacing the old practice by a new one, but rather by considering the new practice to be a 'higher form' of the old one (ibid:21). The old practice is thus preserved in a constantly evolving process.

I draw again on the paradox of detached involvement as an illustration of this phenomenon. According to Dewey (1922), neither concept can produce a new practice on its own; involvement without detached reflections would lead to mechanical practicing without any potential for developing into something new, whereas reflections without involvement would not be able to contribute something meaningful to practice. It is only in their paradoxical interplay, or, to reuse Dewey's (1922:116) terminology, in a 'certain delicate combination', in which practice reproduces into a new form of itself.

Paradox, as a special form of conflict between mutually exclusive but still co-existing and reciprocally influencing opposites, has the potential to lead to novelty in practice and thus should not be ignored.

The argument that our lives are more complex than theory suggests, however, is not really a revolutionary finding. The commonsensical saying that our social world is not

simply black or white is quoted often enough and makes me believe that most people are aware that in practice things are more complicated than usually presented in theory. Despite this saying being so widely recognised, my experience in project management makes me believe that the "black or white" principle is more often applied than not. Too many times I have seen how it is taken for granted that project success can be determined, or that project outcomes can be controlled, or that projects can only be efficiently managed from a detached position.

This made me wonder, in my third research project, where this discrepancy between our beliefs and behaviours comes from. I mentioned how I tried to control situations which I perceived to be uncontrollable by over-emphasising the role of rational approaches. This became particularly obvious in the situation with my father and how I dealt with his fatal disease. It also became also apparent in the way I dealt with a crisis project which I was expected to rescue from failure. I concluded, building on Elias (1987b), that this tendency to over-rationalise uncertain situations in a vein to reduce complexity, must be related to our basic impulses to control the emotions that these intricate situations provoke such as anxiety, shame and anger.

Paradoxical relationships must thus be difficult to withstand for humans as they trigger emotions that make us doubt and feel out of control. It is not really surprising then, that there is a general tendency to avoid or repress these emotions, and thus the underlying paradoxes, by rational means. Elias (1987b) understands the relationship between rational control and emotions as a vicious circle (cf. research project 3 - Control and Emotions). He claims that what is perceived as uncontrollable tends to provoke strong emotions which, in turn, leads to an increased need for control often satisfied by a tendency to rely on rational and linear approaches. This social phenomenon might thus explain the disposition in project management to think in simplified "either…or" terms or to resolve these conflicts using "both…and" categories, and thus avoid the uncertainties which inevitably arise from conflictual tensions. However, responding to this perceived lack of control by abstracting what we cannot deal with has far-reaching implications upon the way that we deal with the social reality in our practice, as already described above.

A logic of paradox may offer another way of engaging with the complexities prevailing in our social lives. Mowles (2015a:34) argues that admitting contradictions and systematically pursuing them in our thoughts and discussions may provide better insights. I do not, however, understand these suggestions to mean that taking paradoxes

in social interactions more seriously will lead to resolving these paradoxes or providing better results. I do not see these suggestions as a new method that we can simply apply to inevitably lead to a better practice. What comes out of these paradoxical social relationships cannot be reliably predicted or controlled. However, I believe that it may be important for project management theories to open up to a more complex "both…and" conception, one that, in a Hegelian tradition, redirects the focus from what should happen to what is actually going on, and thus provides us with more insight into what happens in the social reality of human interactions.

5. Research Method

Research from a Paradoxical Perspective

I explained earlier how thinking and acting are related in a paradoxical movement and thus it seems obvious to also conclude that our ontological and epistemological roots influence the way we do research.

Conceiving projects as if they were systems constituted from their parts that can be analysed, designed, planned and assembled in a way that achieves a pre-conceived whole, leads to a particular conceptualisation of the research strategy. Project researchers are then considered to be neutral observers capable of confirming theoretical propositions using large samples of cases (deductive research approach) or able to induce generalisable knowledge from a sample of data reliable enough to prove the validity of the established hypothesis (inductive research approach) (Bryman 2012, Brinkmann 2014). It is assumed that they can do this by taking an objective stance, either by being completely detached analysts or by being involved as 'participant observers' (Alvesson 2009:159). The so-gained knowledge is then assumed to be transferrable to everyone in the form of a best practice and applicable to all projects independent of their context.

However, conceiving projects as paradoxical social processes based upon the assumptions rooted in Hegel's dialectic logic, as I suggest here, has far reaching implications and consequences for research approaches.

Research in project management then means exploring these paradoxical social processes that form project practice, as practice only becomes meaningful from within these processes (Stacey & Griffin 2005, Dreyfus 1995, Chia & Holt 2006, Shotter 2006, Tsoukas & Sandberg 2011). It is from within these non-linear processes that we experience the tensions from the conflicting involvement in practice, making us detach from and reflect on what is going on while still being engaged in practice, which generates the meaning of experience (Dewey 1922, Heidegger 1962, Brinkmann 2014, Dreyfus 1995). This form of research is not driven by data or theory, as in inductive and deductive reasoning, but is rather triggered by moments of surprise experienced in situations from which doubt and inquiry emerge ('abductive reasoning', Brinkmann 2014:722).

This implies that as researchers of project management, we need to pay more attention to what is going on in our practice and use what we experience, see, feel, think and do as the data of our research.

Taking Experience Seriously and Narrative Research

Researchers on the DMan programme are therefore invited to 'take their experience seriously' and to draw on their work practice (Stacey & Griffin 2005:22–24). Stacey and Griffin see experience as a 'meaningful engagement in relating to others and to oneself' and thus emphasise the necessity of interactions in the process of experiencing (ibid:9). This experience is mainly expressed by recounting stories of our daily interactions with others (ibid:9). These narratives provide an account of the thoughts and feelings of the self and others in a specific situation (ibid:23), and therefore Stacey and Griffin conclude that they should be used as data for our research into social phenomena. As researchers into our own narratives, we are not just detached or participant observers but are rather 'observing participants' (Alvesson 2009:159) of what goes on around and within us while we engage in practice.

According to Etherington (2004), narratives are stories that are part and parcel of our daily lives and it is through stories that we achieve knowledge:

> *'as human beings we learn a great deal from re-telling stories, creating new meanings and deepening existing ones'.*
>
> *Etherington (2004:55)*

She believes that stories not only transfer a specific content (i.e. 'histoire' or the 'what' in a narrative) but also include the beliefs, sentiments and ways of thinking of the narrators (i.e. 'discourse' or the 'how'), and thus provide a way to understand how we make sense of our lives. For the storyteller, constructing her own story requires her to reflect upon her experiences of the past and to make sense of them in the here and now. As such, 'telling and re-telling one's story helps a person create a sense of self' (ibid:75). In this sense, our stories that we reconstruct in the social context of the moment in which they are narrated and informed by our expectations of the future that we experience in this same moment, become a social reality to us and thus may be considered adequate data for our research.

Validity and Generalisability of Narrative Research

Researchers building on quantitative research strategies often reproach qualitative approaches, particularly narrative research, as they believe it relies on too narrow and subjective a sample of research data and therefore the validity, reliability and generalisability of the research results cannot be guaranteed on the same level as a more scientific approach (Bryman 2002:69–70).

By maintaining the ability to guarantee the validity of their research results, quantitative research approaches make a claim which appears reasonable when assuming that reality is given and just needs to be discovered. However, the same claim is difficult to sustain when assuming that social reality is a reconstruction of past experience in the social context of a particular moment while anticipating the future (Griffin 2002, Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000, Stacey 2011). Thus, in social environments, what may be true in one moment may thus no longer be true in other moments of time.

Narrative research does not assert that it aims towards an eternal truth, and it does recognise that narratives do not represent life as lived and are only representations of those lives as told to us (Etherington 2004, Czarniawska 2004:12). Although these narratives describe real events, they are a 'creation out of the complex and chaotic raw material of experience' (Anderson 2005:70). Thus, a narrative is 'locally negotiated' and is viable only for a specific moment and place (Czarniawska 2004:12), and there is no 'fixed and unchanged "Truth"' to be discovered in these narratives (Etherington 2004:27).

Another claim of quantitative researchers, which I believe is difficult to maintain for social phenomena, is that their detached approach supposedly provides objective results that are free from the researcher's influence. This allegation reminds me of the research in my master's programme. In choosing the research topic, in selecting the theories for the literature review, in formulating the interview questions, in guiding the interviews, in transcribing and analysing the data that I collected, in determining the findings, …, thus, through the course of the entire research process, my influence was omnipresent through my beliefs, values and prejudices, and I just could not avoid it. My experience showed me how unrealistic this claim is and made me wonder why then we should try to avoid bias at all.

Fleck (1979), in his research on thought collectives, confirms my experience. He claims that our perception is always influenced by what we already know, and thus, what we recognise is always perceived on the basis of existing knowledge, i.e. 'in a particular thought style, in a particular thought-collective' (ibid:38–39). Unbiased research, either of quantitative or qualitative nature, is, according to this logic, not feasible.

Narrative researchers (Etherington 2004, Czarniawska 2004) do not conceive research as a neutral process free from the influence of its researchers. They therefore encourage the exchange of experiences between the researcher and the social subjects that they conduct their research upon, believing that this co-construction of meaning positively impacts the results of the research or, as noted by Etherington (2004), 'researcher self-disclosure might produce more in-depth data that might therefore be more valid' (ibid:57).

In a similar vein, researchers in the DMan tradition assume that social environments such as organisations or projects can only be understood from 'within the local interactions' and thus any research 'must arise in the researcher's reflection on the micro detail of his or her own experience of interaction with others' (Stacey & Griffin (2005:8). They emphasise, still in a Hegelian tradition, the importance of the tensions between researchers and researchees, as it is in these mutual enabling and constraining social interactions that meaningful research emerges. Unbiased, objective research is, from such a perspective, not realistic.

A further common critique of scientific-oriented researchers is related to the limited sample size of data, which many believe makes it difficult, if not impossible, for narrative research strategies to replicate their findings. Empirical research approaches believe they fulfil this condition by drawing on supposedly reliable sets of data and proven statistical methods to analyse the data. This empirical approach has often proved to lead to generalisable findings in natural sciences in the form of universal laws, but I doubt that their ambitious claim is also valid in the case of social phenomena.

My experiences in project practice could not confirm that theories, in the form of project methods and tools, can be universally applied to all situations in the same way. As I already concluded in my fourth research project, these theoretical findings need to be made specific to social interactions (Stacey 2011,2012), or, as phrased by Dreyfus & Dreyfus (2005:786), they need to be re-contextualised through 'situational discriminations'. It is only in a social context that theories become practical experiences which, in turn, have an effect on these generalisations and make them constantly evolve

(Stacey 2011, 2012, Dreyfus & Dreyfus 2005). This demonstrates the paradoxical and evolutionary nature of the theorising process, where practice and theory continuously and mutually condition each other in a social process of detached involvement. Assuming that this process produces universal and eternal laws that just need to be applied independently of their social context, this is not sustainable in a research approach building on process thinking.

Narrative research does not make such an assertive claim. Its proponents do not assume that their approach produces results which are valid for everyone in all circumstances, but they still consider that which 'triggers recognition in the reader' in their research method as generalisable (Mowles 2015a:13). As such, they acknowledge that a single account is limited to the author's perspective and does not necessarily provide insight into the perspective of other actors within the same narrative. However, they still believe that there is something generalisable, in the sense that a narrative has a 'socially embedded character' and 'integrates the personal and the social' in our experience, therefore enabling us to draw conclusions, through our personal stories, about our social environment (Simpson & Marshall 2010:358–361).

From such a perspective, the narrative and the meaning-making process of the author may well trigger a learning process in others who have lived through similar experiences, thus enabling them to make their own sense of the author's story. I can imagine that many of my peers in project management have had similar experiences to those I described in this thesis and that they may profit from my experience. Not that they would simply adopt my conclusions as if they were methods to be applied, but the conclusions from my narratives may trigger doubts and inquiry into what they do in their practice.

I conclude from this that narrative research may actually be seen to produce something valid and generalisable. Maybe not in the sense of the scientific research approaches which aim for testable, universal and eternal results, but rather in the sense that narrative research contributes to the 'understanding of social life' and provides a 'sense of the lived experience' (Etherington 2004:148), thus becoming relevant beyond the author's own interests (Czarniawska 2004:136).

In the DMan programme, this narrative approach has become an essential cornerstone of the research method, and researchers are invited to pay attention to the micro processes that they are a part of in their practice (Stacey & Griffin 2005:24). They do this by making

sense of their daily organisational practice, involving themselves and others and, thus, becoming increasingly aware of their social reality.

I do not mean to say, however, that narrative research is in any way superior to other types of research. It serves well as a research focused on taking one's own experience and its social context seriously but may be inappropriate for researching other domains. I found it a valuable research method for exploring and challenging my habitual ways of thinking and behaving, helping me to make sense of experiences in the social environments that I work in. This emphasis on experience, inviting me not only to explore what was going on around me but also encouraging me to turn my attention to my own beliefs and values, and explore how this may have affected others and myself, was at the same time a valuable and a disturbing learning experience. Challenging habitual ways of thinking and doing that sedimented in many social interactions over many years is not an easy process.

DMan Research - an Iterative Process

Exploring these narratives is thus not the straightforward undertaking that scientific research approaches commonly assume it to be. I remember the linear empirical approach from my dissertation for the Master in Change Management. My research was well thought-through and planned: I selected a research question, reviewed the corresponding literature, collected the required data from various projects through document analysis and semi-structured interviews, categorised the data in themes and analysed these themes to come to my final conclusions (Bryman 2012). At that time, it appeared to me as if this linear approach would inevitably lead to the discovery of a best practice that would withstand any critical evaluations and be applicable in all situations.

However, I also noticed, in a similar way to my professional projects, that during this sequential process I was mainly busy with ensuring my research plan materialised itself in the way that I had conceived it, and was thus unconsciously striving to unfold what was already enfolded in my plans, leaving no space for surprises or novelty to emerge.

These rigid assumptions do not, however, comply with an ontology assuming that things are always in a state of becoming and that practice is continuously evolving in surprising ways. Exploring this uncertain practice is a process which is necessarily also

unpredictable and never complete (Chia 1996:47). The linear deductive and inductive forms of reasoning commonly underlying empirical research methods seem too limited to cope with these uncertain and endless social phenomena. They may, however, be supplemented by a form of reasoning allowing for surprises to happen, thus making them more open to taking unexpected turns in the research process ('abductive reasoning' Brinkmann 2014:721–722, Cunliffe & Coupland 2012:15).

The research process chosen in the DMan programme leaves room for such uncertainties by taking on an iterative approach. It is a three-year programme comprised of twelve four-day residential units with a final thesis to be delivered at the end of the programme. This thesis is built up through the writing of four research projects, each of which is a reflexive narrative and provides an account of meaningful events in which the author was involved, showing the 'influences, literature and traditions of thought that are shaping the practice of the students' (Stacey & Griffin 2005:24). The final step in this thesis is a synopsis, which provides further reflexive considerations of the student's evolution of thinking and practice during the programme. It is in this iterative research process that the research themes emerge and converge into the final synopsis.

I experienced this research process as leading to research results that were predictable and unpredictable at the same time. When I started my research in the DMan programme, I had a good idea of what I wanted to research, namely, the exploration of typical concepts in the area of project management such as project success and failure, along with what it means to control a project and how to engage in projects as a project leader.

Although loosely sticking to my plan, the path to this synopsis was paved with surprises, frustrations, struggles and doubts. These surprises led me to rethink many taken-for-granted assumptions and reconstruct previously unquestioned interpretations of what I do in practice, resulting in themes and findings that I could never have predicted in this way. I never actually planned to write about the paradoxes in project management, or to explore the role of emotions in project control, or to conclude that project practice emerges out of a social process of detached involvement. These were themes that came up while reflecting upon past experiences and trying to make sense of them in the light of various theories. My understanding of what we actually do in projects has evolved from one research project to the next, taking turns that I could not certainly foresee. It is in this iterative research process that these ideas were formed and evolved into what they are now. Thus, my research was a long-term and spiral process of

reading, writing, discussing, re-thinking and re-writing up to this synopsis and probably even beyond.

DMan Research - a Social Process

However, this evolutive research process was not something that I did on my own. The unexpected turns that I took were also the result of discussions that I had with peer researchers and faculty members. In controversial conversations and in many review cycles, my thoughts were challenged in significant ways, leading to breakdowns (in a Heideggerian sense (Heidegger 1962)) in my research practice, making me further reflect on my project management practice, myself and my way of thinking.

In the DMan programme, students are invited to reflect in both larger and smaller settings on their research questions, as well as exchange critical views on each other's research, both in terms of the literature used and the resulting meaning-making. This research process is a social one, in the tradition of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, taking an iterative approach of commenting and discussing each research project several times until it is considered to be "good enough" for proceeding to the next stage.

These research interactions mainly happen during the twelve residential weekends that each student must attend. During these four-day long weekends there are faculty presentations and discussions on theories both in the larger group and in smaller ones, students present their work, there are several learning set meetings across the weekend and a lot of informal discussions between students and faculty members during lunches and dinners. In between these residential units, learning sets regularly meet in video conference sessions to discuss the progress of their work.

Two of these formal research settings are the "community meeting" and the "learning sets", which I will go on to present in more depth to emphasise the social character of the research process in the DMan programme.

Community Meeting

The community meeting is an 'experiential group'[16] in the tradition of the Institute of Group Analysis, which takes place in every morning session of the residential units. In this meeting, peer researchers and the DMan faculty are positioned in a circle to discuss whichever topics seem relevant to them; there is no agenda, and no one is leading the meeting.

Mowles (2017:6) describes the purpose of the community meeting as an enquiry into the various meanings that participants make of what is discussed and how participants deal with the group's reaction to their interpretations. These contradictory interpretations create anxieties and doubts about how one is perceived by the rest of the group and generate a potential for reflection on implicit and unchallenged assumptions. It is these group dynamics, which also take place in our professional environments, that DMan researchers are invited to pay attention to and thus improve their skills in dealing with human interactions.

My first encounter with this meeting effectively illustrates what may go on in such a setting. The meeting began with complete silence for what felt like an eternity until, at last, someone started by describing her feelings about a participant who had to leave the programme due to being judged not "good enough" to continue. The person sitting next to me then intervened and described how afraid he was to meet the same fate. While exposing how he felt about this, he started to cry. I was intrigued by the situation and found it difficult to make sense of what was going on around me. Not only that the meeting had no agenda and no obvious purpose, at least not from my understanding of it at that time, but that I also felt obliged to share my deepest feelings on what was going on for me while engaging in this community. This did not come close to anything that I had experienced in the project environments that I usually work in. Openly discussing these group dynamics, and sharing my feelings about them, was simply difficult to imagine and I was not ready to engage with the other participants in this way. I respected what was going on in this meeting for others, but I preferred to stay silent.

Contrary to my expectations, my silence did not remain unnoticed for long, and even became a recurring theme. Paradoxically, my behaviour provoked just the opposite of what I had intended to achieve; I felt put on the spot. I wondered why others bothered

[16] experiential groups are used in group analytic theory to denote group settings without a therapeutic purpose (Mowles 2017:7).

about my silence, after all, it was just about me. It did not occur to me that my silence could be perceived by others as a strong gesture, raising questions in them and giving rise to interpretations of why I did not engage in these discussions, especially as I did not show the same pattern in other settings during residential units. I could not imagine that someone might be offended or even feel rejected by my reluctance to contribute to the community in this setting.

This experience shows that it was not just about me taking a decision to stay silent. Rather, my silence needs to be examined in the context of the prevailing group dynamics where the various expectations that we had of each other were continuously reinterpreted, leading to doubts, inquiry and to adaptions in these patterns that no one could adequately predict or fully control. On the one hand, I was influenced by this unusual setting and the expectations that I believed to come along with it to contribute in a certain way. On the other hand, my behaviour raised various expectations in others, with some just being curious as to why I showed these patterns in this setting, and others feeling the need to take care of someone who appeared to feel excluded. Again, others may have felt disappointed that I did not contribute in the way that they expected. These interpretations of each other's expectations led to unchecked assumptions that triggered new patterns of behaviour. So, even though I tried to avoid being noticed, I was part of this complex social process, and even influenced the other participants through my passive behaviour.

This experience of staying silent, and the reactions that it provoked in others, made me reflect on my behaviour and search for answers and new ways to engage with my peers. It also made me reflect on situations in my job and how we tend to ignore these dynamics in projects, preferring to deal with the "real stuff" instead. Taking these dynamics more seriously may lead to more meaningful discussions, though, not necessarily resulting in something better.

I have mentioned these reflections of my experience with the community meeting in this synopsis because it demonstrates the inherently social character of the research in this programme. In the tradition of a doctoral programme, the research process is not just about dealing with abstract theories, but it also has a very practical connection to the social dynamics which we experience in organisations and projects, and also in the research process.

A further indication of the inherently social character of the DMan research approach can be seen in the learning sets.

Learning Set

The learning set is a group typically composed of between three and four researchers and one supervisor, with a second supervisor intervening at regular intervals. New researchers starting this programme negotiate their way into a learning set, while others leave either because they complete or abort the programme. A learning set thus demonstrates very similar intersubjective dynamics characterised by conflicting interests and emotional responses, as commonly experienced in our professional environments where people frequently come and go. This produces continuously changing dynamics within a group.

In these learning sets, the focus in on research. Every six weeks a new version of a research project is delivered by each participant, which is then critically reviewed and commented on by all the others. After several iterations (typically between four and six), and when the work is considered good enough both by the learning set and by the two supervisors, the researcher may proceed to the next stage.

These interactions in the learning set significantly impacted upon on my work. The critical reviews on my research projects often led to deep reflections in the group and in private. For example, in my fourth research project, the critical comments from my learning set led me to pause in the middle of my research and wonder why my colleagues perceived the accounts of my practice as abstract and detached while I tried to idealise responsibility-taking in project management. For three versions, I struggled to understand what they meant, but was also reluctant to engage with their criticism as I wanted to hold on to my plans to thematise the concept of responsibility in project management. I tried to overcome their criticism by providing more detailed descriptions of what I do in my practice, but in doing so became aware that I was simply reproducing the idealised representation of what projects should be doing as prescribed by project management theories. I was simply unable to describe what I actually do when dealing with my clients. I eventually gave up trying to describe the perfect project world and, while using the same narrative, I focused on the dynamics in my practice when I was relentlessly inviting the client team to take on responsibility. This example made me aware of how I often had such conflicts with the comments from my learning set, which

caused breakdowns (in Heideggerian terms (Heidegger 1962)), doubts and reflections and often led me to take unexpected turns in my research.

In addition to this focus on our research, another purpose of the learning set was to reflect on the group dynamics of our meetings, similarly to what we did in the context of the community meeting. We discussed the experience we create when mutually commenting on each other's work, how we feel when receiving unexpected criticism and how difficult it can be to criticise somebody without being overly dismissive or too nice. This reminds me of my early days in this learning set when I invited my peers to "fire up" any comments that they may have, claiming that I would be able to "take it". However, over the course of the programme, I had to admit to myself that is it hard to be critiqued on something I had put my whole heart into. It also made me aware of how, in my job as a project manager, I often commented on other people's work without being overly sensitive about how they may take my criticism. It is these kinds of dynamics which we typically reflect upon in these learning sets and which have a relevance for our research as well as for our professional practice.

The community meetings and learning sets may thus be seen as playgrounds for practising the skills of becoming sensitive to the dynamics in groups. In the DMan programme there is a strong focus on these paradoxical patterns of interaction and how we make sense of these patterns through reflection (Mowles, van der Gaag & Fox 2010:134). They thus emphasise the importance of reflective thinking in the research process.

Limitations - Reflections as a Method?

In a section describing the research method, an invitation to reflect upon what goes on in the group and for oneself could easily be misunderstood as another method or a new prescription for how to analyse our practice in groups in order to find better ways and thus achieve better results. This is not my intention.

In research project four, I have extensively described, while drawing largely on Heidegger's (1962) and Dewey's (1922) ideas, how I see reflections as being part of a complex social process of detached involvement. In this process, reflections are only meaningful as the result of a disruption from involvement (cf. research project 4) and any

actions resulting from these reflections only become meaningful when they are probed while engaging in practice. Thus, involvement in practice, breakdown and detached reflections are all part of the same complex social process of meaning-making, and there is no way to objectively detach oneself from this process to allow for better analysis or determination, or, as phrased by Stacey (2011:338), 'there is no possibility of the doubling of process'.

Reflections are thus a natural part of the process of human development and I consider that neither involved engagement nor detached reflections of their own would be able to reproduce a new practice. Rather, both are required:

> *[…] habit does not, of itself, know, for it does not of itself stop to think, observe or remember. Neither does impulse of itself engage in reflection or contemplation.*
>
> *(Dewey 1922:116)*

Following Dewey's logic, I believe that we cannot avoid reflection, and in this sense I sympathise with Lynch's (2000:27) conclusion that it is impossible not to think about what we do or how we think about it. If we assume that reflections are part of a social process of involvement and breakdown, inviting someone to reflect might appear as a call for more conscious and "deeper" reflections than the ones we already engage in, and these "deeper" reflections might be considered to necessarily lead to better insights about what we do and how we think about what we do. I argue that whatever comes out of these "deeper" reflections still needs to be probed in action in order to become meaningful, and the result of this involvement may be perceived as valuable, as it may be perceived as deeply unsettling.

Nevertheless, I concede that paying attention to what may be going on for others and for oneself while engaging in practice, while critically questioning one's own assumptions of what is driving one's behaviour, may lead to insights into our practice and may change our actions in significant ways. However, I also think that these actions are part of a complex social process, and thus, however deep the reflections leading to these actions may have been, what comes out of this complex process will lead to something expected and unexpected at the same time.

I am therefore sceptical of the notion that we can conceive deliberate reflections as an idealised way to make sense of practice, or to perceive them as a skill of successful

leaders or consultants. My research into the paradoxes in project management has, however, led to an increased interest in the relationship between thinking and acting. Building on Hegel's concept of 'Aufhebung', Mowles (2015a) sees, in their dialectical interplay, the potential for reflexivity to emerge. He understands thought and action to transcend through a conflicting movement into a 'unity of opposition' from which arises a higher order reflection enabling us to challenge our own way of thinking (Mowles 2015a:21,32).

I find this idea quite interesting, but I am not sure if I have reached this point of understanding the concept of detached involvement, and I believe that I need to conduct some further explorations to get beyond this point. However, I think that this would exceed the framework of my research on the general impact of paradoxical thinking on project management for now, though it may be a good theme for a future research.

Literature in Narrative Research

In empirical research approaches the literature review is a central part of the process which takes place at a specific stage in the course of the research. Relying on realist assumptions, deductive and inductive researches strategies are first and foremost concerned with discovering a new theory, either through identifying omissions in existing theories (i.e. deductive reasoning) or as a finding from a thorough analysis of data (i.e. inductive reasoning). In this linear process, the literature mainly serves to review what is already known about the proposition that is to be researched, and to analyse what theories and concepts have already been applied. For this purpose, the literature used is mainly focused upon a particular research theme, and the primary aim is to identify gaps in these theories in relation to the propositions taken. (Bryman 2012:8,98–99)

In the DMan programme, there is no central literature review phase. Instead, practical situations at work are used in which unexpected things happen, causing us to inquire into relevant literature to make sense of the lived experiences. The aim of this research approach is thus not to identify a gap in existing literature which requires filling. Rather, the focus is on the relationship between situation and inquiry (i.e. abductive reasoning) (Brinkmann 2014) and literature serves as an aid for reflecting on these situations and surprises that we experience. The DMan research approach is thus an iterative process in

which theory and practice continuously and mutually inform each other and thus provide new insights into both theory and practice. In this iterative process, the focus of inquiry changes from one research project to another, as does the literature used over the course of the research.

My choice of literature for this thesis was triggered, on the one hand, by a list of typical scholars supporting the theory on which the DMan programme is built (i.e. the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin, Shaw)), and is mainly influenced by a Hegelian world view such as Elias, Mead, Dewey, Foucault, Bourdieu, Burkitt and so forth. On the other hand, this choice of literature also emerged from my reflections on the narratives used as the data of research, leading me to draw on other scholars not necessarily typical for the DMan community such as Heidegger.

The main theories that this thesis draws upon are concerned with understanding practice in project management by building on different ontological assumptions to the ones typically underpinning contemporary project management theories. This led me to use the following literature:

- PMI, IPMA, Prince 2 and Agile Alliance Organisation as the key representative institutions in project management providing an extensive body of knowledge on various topics in project management.

- Elias, Dewey, Heidegger, Griffin for the conception on human development and human practice.

- Stacey, Griffin, Shaw and Mowles for their contribution to complexity and paradoxical thinking in social processes.

- Elias, Dewey and Burkitt for the role of emotions in social practice.

- Elias, Foucault, Flyvbjerg, Stacey for the role of power in social practice.

This is the literature that significantly influenced my research on project management practice and led me to understand it as a complex social process.

6. Ethics

Ethics in Narrative Research

Before starting to explain how I try to maintain an ethical approach to my research in this thesis, I will first explore what ethical behaviour means in the framework of narrative research.

As described in the method section, narrative research is largely concerned with exploring what we do in practice in relation to others, and thus these narratives also include accounts of what we think that other people do, think and feel. These people become characters in the plots of our lives, and as such we may reveal intimate things about them; we thus have a responsibility towards them. This raises ethical concerns because narratives may disclose private lives and place them in the public domain (Brinkmann & Kvale 2005:157–158, Ellis 2007:4,20).

Under the ontological assumption that reality exists and just needs to be discovered, it is reasonable to suppose that what is ethical may be defined in the form of a universal principle. Therefore, in research it is often attempted to secure an ethical research approach through the definition of ethical standards that must be respected by all researchers ('procedural ethics' Ellis 2007:4, Brinkmann & Kvale 2005:159). Ethical committees are then mandated to implement procedures that determine what it means to be ethical in research. In the same way, this thesis received ethics approval from the University of Hertfordshire on 4th August 2015 (Protocol number: BUS/PG/UH/00991) and has been developed in accordance with these ethical principles and guidelines and thus maintains the ethical standards of the University of Hertfordshire.

However, from the perspective of a processual ontology, where things are socially constructed and are constantly in a state of becoming, ethical behaviour cannot just be measured through rigid standards. Ellis (2007:5) concludes that no universal principle would be able to cover all of the situations that we explore in research or, as phrased by Brinkmann & Kvale (2005:159), 'no rule, principle or procedure can be self-interpreting'; we need still to judge when and how to particularise these ethical standards.

Ellis (2007:4) calls for an 'ethics in practice' or a 'situational ethics', i.e. an ethics which copes with unpredictable situations when engaging in research and which continuously requires moral judgements to be made. Such situations occurred in my research, for example, when writing about people who showed strong emotional reactions such as

crying, which is untypical for, or at least considered an inappropriate behaviour in business environments, and might damage their reputation if made public. Or, when writing about obvious resistance to company strategies and thus potentially compromising the people who I described as showing such behaviours, as for example in my fourth research project where people resisted against adopting a methodology imposed by top management. It is in these situations, when revealing people's vulnerabilities, that I had to decide about what I can disclose or how to present things in a way to avoid identifying these people. I therefore had to continuously adapt my ethical considerations to the circumstances encountered in my research.

In these situations, ethical research does not mean simply complying with a standard but rather, according to Ellis (2007:4), feeling responsible for one's own behaviour and the consequences that it may have on others. It means treating the people and communities that we research with respect and dignity and being mindful of our role as researchers.

What does all this mean for my research?

As the data of my research is comprised of narratives, this entails mentioning the other people who are part of theses narratives such as the clients and colleagues with whom I was involved. However, these people cannot be considered as the "data" of my research in the strict sense, as the purpose of my research was not to gather personal data and analyse it as if these people were cases to be studied.

As a narrative researcher, I build on my own experience as a 'meaningful engagement in relating to others and to oneself' (Stacey & Griffin 2005:9). Thus, I am interested in my own thinking and acting as it develops in relation to other people, and as such I am focused on the social dynamics going on in the project management practice that I am part of. This understanding of human development builds on Mead's (1934:204) conception of the social self which can only develop in interaction with others, and therefore, this self can only realise itself through the other. In these narratives, I therefore pay attention to how interactions with others affect my thinking and acting rather than focusing on analysing individual behaviours.

Nevertheless, I am aware that I have a responsibility towards the people who form a part of my stories and should prevent them from any suffering caused by the consequences of

my research or any personal offence caused by my writing. Although it is impossible for me to foresee all potential effects of my research upon others, I have implemented some measures to reduce the risk of this happening.

What I do to maintain an ethical research

As described above, my first encounter with ethics in research was when requesting approval for my research and filling in the Ethics Approval Notification of the University of Hertfordshire. This is the first time that I became aware of my ethical responsibilities as a researcher. Although these ethical standards were not always applicable to the particularities of narrative research approaches, they served to thematise ethics in my research and made me cognisant of the potential impact of my research upon the people that form part of my narratives.

Another form of control, although of a more informal nature, can be seen in the peer reviews of my research projects which partially served to make my research comply with ethical norms and values. This was another way to continuously remind me of my responsibilities as a researcher in relation to ethics. As described in the research method section, the research process in the DMan programme is a social process and my work has been continuously reviewed by and discussed with peer researchers and DMan faculty members. An example of this continuous control of ethical concerns was when I changed the gender of one of the persons mentioned in my narratives; this led to discussions in my learning set about the impact of anonymising research data, both for my research and with regards to ethics. In this way ethical questions were an ongoing concern during the whole research process.

In addition, my awareness for ethical questions has also been shaped by my role as a professional in project management working in the financial industry. In this role, I follow the strict ethical standards of professional bodies in this sector. For example, as a certificate-holder and member of the International Project Management Association (IPMA), I have to subscribe to the ethical standards of this institution, and thus a general awareness of ethical questions in project environments has become part of my professional DNA. Themes of respect, dignity, preventing harm and confidentiality have thus become norms and values that are important for me to consider.

Despite this awareness of ethical issues in my professional life and in my research, and despite the formal and informal control bodies put in place by the university and the DMan faculty, questions of an ethical nature regarding consent and confidentiality still prevail.

In terms of consent, I have not sought the consent of all the people mentioned in my stories. All of my narratives took place before I chose them as data for my research and thus it was not always possible to get the formal consent of all those people mentioned . Some events occurred years ago, for example, the account that I gave of my father's fatal disease, in which case asking for consent was obviously not possible. Other more recent events took place before I started the research projects in which they were used as data for my research.

It would therefore have been difficult to ensure the consent of all the participants in my stories, as due to the evolutionary nature of the research process of the DMan programme I had not always planned which narratives I would use for my research and who would consequently be the "contributors" to this research. Nevertheless, in two cases I did inform my client while being involved with them that I was in the process of a doctoral research and that I might use my experience with them as part of my narratives. Both client representatives agreed on condition that the anonymity of the company and employees were secured.

In order to make sure that the people and organisations that I used in my narratives are not compromised by my interpretations of the situations that we experienced together, I respected the confidentiality agreements by anonymising the research data as much as possible. Names of people, locations and organisations and other identifying information (titles, type of work, gender, etc.) have been changed in order to preserve the anonymity of the situations that I describe in my narratives.

By adopting this approach over the course of my research I am confident that I respected formal ethical research standards and demonstrated proper handling of questions of an ethical nature.

7. Contribution to Practice

Introduction

Conceiving project management practice as complex responsive processes of relating means ascribing paradox with a central role in the development of practice. Stacey, Griffin & Shaw (2000) and Mowles (2015a) understand practice as resulting from many conflictual interactions between individuals and these micro-practices are packed with paradoxes.

I have explained in previous sections how in these micro-practices various paradoxical tensions influence the development of human practice. I described how people mutually enable and constrain each other, how human agency is determined through co-existing and mutually conditioning social structures and individual impulses, how practice transforms as we are simultaneously engaged in it and detached from it, and how meaning-making is informed in the present by the past and the future at the same time.

I further described how such paradoxical tensions made me feel to be in control and out of control at the same time. The various emotions that this uncertainty provoked led me to avoid these conflictual tensions by trying to resolve them in abstract "either…or* categories and made me focus on what I believed should be done.

From my research into the complex responsive processes of relating in project management, I concluded that these paradoxical tensions are part and parcel of human interactions and thus should not be ignored or avoided. Therefore what I call for in this thesis is in essence to take these paradoxes seriously. In this chapter I will try to explain what this means for practitioners in project management.

Paying Attention to Paradoxical Interactions

Conceiving project practice as driven by these paradoxical tensions makes the attempt to conceptualise projects as linear and rigid models appear problematic.

In my fourth research project, building on scholars researching the development of practice such as Gherardi (2009), Chia (1996), Tsoukas & Sandberg (2011), Chia & Holt 2006, Brinkmann (2014), Feldman & Orlikowsky (2011) and Shotter (2006), Simpson (2009), I concluded that this tendency to objectify, and thus to reduce what we do in practice to generalised models results in ignoring what is going on between us.

In their research on reification and recognition, Honneth et al. (2008) indicate how these reifications lead to reducing our 'attentiveness for meaningful circumstances in a given situation' and thus result in misrecognising those involved in practice (ibid:59). I have described in my narratives how this focus on abstract methods produced exactly this lack of attention and recognition that Honneth and his colleagues refer to. Focusing on achieving project success criteria (cf. research project 2), or on materialising a master plan (cf. research project 3), or on implementing a particular project approach (cf. research project 4) made us insensitive to how people particularised these generalised concepts while engaging with others.

I do not mean to say, however, that project methods have no right to exist or should even be avoided; as generalisations of past experiences they are helpful in that they prevent us from constantly reinventing the wheel and thus they have their role in this process. Mowles (2012:551) points to the paradoxical nature of these models. On the one hand, he sees them as helpful for achieving something in relation with others. On the other hand, he ascribes to them the potential to make us insensitive to what we actually do while engaging with others.

Thus, acknowledging the uncertain nature of projects means that we can no longer make these theoretical and abstract concepts the centre of our attention, as it makes us avoid the uncertainties that we try to control. Mowles (2015a:168) claims that 'we can only become more certain by investigating uncertainty'. I understand him to mean that by noticing how we engage with others, and by leaving space for the doubts arising from these conflictual interactions, we may have the chance to challenge things that we take for granted and act in different ways (though not necessarily in better ways).

I understand agile principles[17] in project management as an attempt to provide a means to engage with uncertain project environments. Project methodologies relying on these principles build on iterative approaches and emphasise local collaboration over methods and procedures, and thus appear to aim to allow uncertainty to occur. I find such evolutive and less rigid approaches to be more helpful in facing the uncertainties that we encounter in projects than the plan-driven[18] and method-focused traditional project management approaches. Where I see a problem, though, is when these agile principles are believed to be able to manage away uncertainties and thus, again, become abstracts prescriptions. I perceive them rather as providing a way to help us 'managing in uncertainty', to use Mowles's (2015a) words, allowing us to redirect the focus from these linear and rigid models to how we use them in our daily interactions with others.

Taking paradoxes in project management practice seriously then means paying attention to the local interactions from which practice emerges. Simpson (2009:1340) in her research on practice, emphasises the importance of paying attention to the local interactions between interdependent individuals. She calls for turning our attention to interactions that we consider to have a significant influence on our practice, or to interactions that we esteem to contribute to the construction of meaning, or to habits that may have informed the observed conduct in practice. I understand from this that paying attention to local interactions might reveal important dynamics going on in this practice. I relate Simpson's invitation to focus on what we observe in local interactions to the signs that I noticed in my narratives. I was cognisant of these signs, when, for example, some team members colluded to counter my proposals, or when people were indifferent to my interventions, or when I was confronted by obvious resistance when I challenged their habitual ways of working. But, instead of bringing up what I perceived while

[17] In the Agile Manifesto, the root source of all agile methodologies, the following principles for agile projects have been defined: individuals and interactions over processes and tools, working product over comprehensive documentation, customer collaboration over contract negotiation, responding to change over following a plan.

[18] Plan-driven project management (also know as waterfall project management approaches) stand for a linear sequential project approach in which one project phase follows another based on a pre-set design captured in the form of a project plan. Such an approach builds on the hypothesis that late changes in the engineering process are more difficult, and thus more expensive to compensate than if anticipated in early project phases. It is a highly structured approach finding its origins in manufacturing and construction projects and has also become very popular in IT projects. Nowadays this approach is increasingly replaced by agile approaches, which are considered to be more flexible and thus better able to deal with the uncertainties encountered in project environments (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waterfall_model, retrieved May, 15th 2018).

engaged in practice and making it a theme of my intervention, I preferred to ignore those signs in a vain attempt to make things move on and focus on what I considered needed to be done.

In his research on the impact of scientific thinking in education, Thomas (2012:39) calls for an 'intelligent noticing' to point to the importance of focusing on tacit knowledge used by practitioners instead of concentrating on methods and tools. I understand Mowles (2012:544) in a similar way when he emphasises the role of practical judgement and invites us to shift the focus from the theoretical models to how we functionalise these models in everyday practice through reflection and negotiation, thus acknowledging the importance of recognition of others in our social practice.

Paying attention to these local interactions with others may thus reveal more meaningful insights about what goes on while applying project management methods.

Taking Breakdowns Seriously

It is this kind of noticing and becoming attentive of what we actually do while being emotionally immersed in project practice that is what I call for here. As argued in my fourth research project, however, we only become aware of our habitual practice through experiencing 'breakdowns' (in Heideggerian terms (Heidegger 1962)) from involved practice. In these surprises that occur while engaging with others, we become conscious that something unexpected happens. Paying attention to the doubts occurring in these moments of breakdown might lead to interesting inquiries into what might be going on in practice.

In my research projects I have demonstrated how these doubts and reflections may influence practice. For example, when I felt my realist conception of project success challenged, making me wonder what success means (cf. research project 2), or when I felt that I was not in control of my projects and questioned the total-control paradigm in project management (cf. research project 3), or when I noticed that my expert advice was not accepted in the way that I expected, thus making me wonder about how to engage with my clients (cf. research project 4). I concluded from these situations that reflections, triggered by the experience of contradiction and doubt, make us think about what we do and how we think about what we do, and thus inform our actions. It is in this nonlinear

process of struggling, noticing, doubting and inquiring in relation with other people that led me to rethink my approach, role and relations towards them.

Taking the paradoxes in project management seriously thus also means taking seriously the breakdowns that we experience in practice. Building on Mowles (2015a:167), I now understand these breakdowns to occur from the paradoxical tensions that we experience while engaging in practice and as such, these conflicts are a valuable source for practitioners for making better sense of their practice. These moments of disruption from practice reveal what matters to us, so that we feel compelled to reflect about what is going on for us in relation to others. Ignoring these intersubjective conflicts and instead idealising harmonious collaboration, as often prescribed in contemporary project management theories, would deprive us of the potential that these conflicts offer for the development of practice. I am not, however, calling for the idealisation of conflicts as a way to leverage their potential by exploiting them consciously and deliberately. What I call for is noticing our own breakdowns and using this valuable data to make sense of what is going on for us.

In this sense, these conflicts, and the breakdowns that they cause in us, are also an interesting source for researchers. I became aware during my research how the narratives that I chose in my research projects described unexpected situations in my professional and private life which made me challenge what I do and reflect on it. I simply, and unconsciously, described some of the breakdowns in my experience, raising themes which mattered to me. Thus, it was the narratives that chose me, rather than me consciously choosing them. I remember a controversial discussion that I had with my peers in the learning set about what should trigger our research in the first place: a good narrative or a theme that we are interested in. I now think that we should research the breakdowns we experience in our practice, as these disruptions from social practice make us become aware of what matters to us and what causes us to become emotional about a certain topic or situation and thus triggers our research.

Emotions - a Key Driver of Practice

This emotional character of breakdowns also means that the doubting, noticing and reflecting that I described in my narratives did not appear out of nowhere, and was also not the result of pure detached thinking. Burkitt (2012:469) sees in every thought an 'emotional-volitional' dimension, meaning that every thought is triggered by emotions resulting from engagement with others. I recognise Burkitt's concept of 'emotional reflexivity' in Heidegger's concept of breakdown, where every reflection is the result of an emotional breakdown from social practice. We can thus conclude that emotions play a fundamental role in the development of human practice, as I also outlined in detail in my third research project.

I see these emotions as being related to the paradoxes that we face in our lives. Mowles (2015a:167) states that although paradox might explain the complex nature of practice, it does not provide answers without calling out further paradoxes. I understand him to mean that we will never get around the paradoxes prevailing in practice, and this often causes us to feel unable to control what we want to control, and thus provokes emotions. In my research projects I demonstrated how the paradoxical nature of project practice triggered all sorts of emotions such as the fear of not being able to control what is not fully controllable, anxiety or shame of failure or feeling guilty or upset when things do not work out as planned. I described in my narratives how these feelings were omnipresent and influenced my behaviour. It is surprising that in project management theories emotions are often either completely disregarded or at best regarded as something that needs to be brought under control, as they supposedly lead to inefficient behaviours and the obscuring of the decision-making process (cf. research project 3). This way of dealing with emotions in project management appears to me now as a defensive reaction to the perceived lack of control that we experience from the paradoxical tensions we are caught up in, leading us to take refuge in something that we believe we can control, namely rational models.

This leads me to another insight into project management practice. Taking paradoxes seriously then also means taking seriously our own emotions as well as those of others. We should accept the important role that these emotions play in our meaning-making of daily practice. Noticing how these emotions paradoxically enable and constrain human relationships and how they affect our own thoughts and behaviour may be a valuable source for better understanding what goes on in our social reality.

This reminds me of how I dealt with my father's disease. I now regret that I took such an abstract approach, as if it were one of my projects. I tried to control and even avoid what I felt at that moment, attempting to distant myself from a situation that I felt difficult to bear. I think that if I could have taken the breakdowns provoking these emotions more seriously, instead of trying to gain control over something that I obviously could not control, I could have engaged in a more meaningful way to deal with this difficult situation. I believe that the same processes prevail in our businesses, and that this experience can be easily projected onto what I lived in my projects, where feelings triggered behaviours which are worth becoming aware of when making sense of our breakdowns from practice.

However, these breakdowns should not necessarily be understood as severe emotional disruptions that always prevent us from practicing. They may also be more minor things going on in discussions when interacting with others. Simpson & Marshall (2010) point to how these breakdowns and their related emotions occur in the gesture-response mechanism described by Mead and how in this process unexpected responses to gestures might lead to doubt and inquiry, as shown in my meeting with Martha in research project four. These minor and major breakdowns and the sometimes intense emotions that they provoke in us are worth taking seriously. In this sense, following Simpson & Marshall's (2010:357) conclusion, I understand practitioners to be first and foremost researchers of paradoxes, breakdowns and emotions above anything else.

Thus, instead of trying to control emotions by taking refuge in rational control mechanisms, noticing these emotions might break the vicious cycle between lack of control and emotions that Elias (1987a:46–48) refers to and might redirect our focus to social interactions and lead to more meaningful ways to engage in practice. In consistency with my own argument, however, making ourselves aware of these emotional processes will not necessarily lead to a better situation. It may, however allow us to learn from our experience and enable practitioners to become more skilful in engaging with others.

Project Practice - Self-Organising Participation

This leads me to a final insight for project management practice. Experiencing paradoxes, the breakdowns and the emotions that come with them, making us notice that something unexpected is going on, triggering doubt and leading us to make sense of what disturbs us, can only be meaningful while participating in practice. It is only through being involved in the turmoil of local interactions that, through this nonlinear interplay of thinking and acting, a new practice will emerge (cf. research project 4).

Griffin (2002:14–15) refers to 'participative self-organization' to denote this engagement into practice. He understands self-organisation as a paradoxical process which transforms itself from within through enabling and constraining power relations between interdependent participants, simultaneously forming the group and its participants, and which no one can control from outside of the process. It is in this paradoxical self-organising participation that Griffin understands the very essence of experience to emerge (ibid:15).

However, Griffin's conception of self-organisation is not to be confused with the self-organising teams often prescribed in project management methodologies. They rather build on an individualist concept of human development and agency, assuming visionary leadership, linear goal-orientation, empowerment, harmonious collaboration and organisation through simple rules. Stacey (2012b) understands such self-organising teams as self-managing at best, but not self-organised as in Griffin's conception of this term, as the conflictual tensions that are the basis of Griffin's understanding of participative self-organisation are lost in this prescribed self-organisation.

I am therefore arguing for a radically different understanding of the term, not seeing self-organisation as a prescription that we may implement in projects, but rather as self-organised patterns of interactions which go on in practice, whether we want them or not, and which we cannot leverage or exploit in order to become more successful in what we do. What I argue for is that through participating in the complex responsive processes of relating we may be able to make more meaningful contribution to the practice in which we engage.

Limitations of a Turn to Practice

Conceiving projects as paradoxical social processes leads the emphasis away from abstract models that leaders or consultants just need to skilfully apply and invites us to take our practice more seriously. However, we should not make the same mistake again and idealise the other extreme of the paradox. Calling for turning to practice would lead us to eliminate or resolve the paradoxes between theory and practice, between thinking and acting or between detached and involved modes of engagement. It is exactly this kind of abstraction of the paradox which distracts us from social reality. This would again mean dismissing the paradoxical tensions that drive human development. Neither detached reflections nor a simple turn to practice on its own would allow us to explain the social reality of our practice (Dewey 1922:116).

Furthermore, noticing our breakdowns and inquiring into the doubts that arise from them should not be understood as a new prescription. Being sensitive to such tensions will not necessarily provide better solutions or lead to a better practice. Mowles points to their paradoxical potential to achieve exactly the opposite, namely more uncertainty and more doubts (Mowles 2015a:168, 171) and Stacey (2011) concludes from his research that every reflection is only an activity among many others in the complex process of participating and that 'there is no possibility of the doubling of process' (ibid:338); doubt, inquiry and involvement within practice are part of the same social process and this process cannot be deliberately determined, nor avoided.

So, whatever we do, we cannot avoid these paradoxical tensions, and we will not be able to control them, but this should not lead project management practitioners to ignore them either. Therefore, I call for taking them seriously and paying attention to them.

What am I doing differently in my practice now?

My call for taking paradox seriously then raises the question of how these insights have changed the way that I engage in project management practice.

From the outside, the way that I exercise my job as a project management consultant may not have changed dramatically. I still use the same theoretical models that I always used as a project management expert. I have no new methods and tools to offer that would allow us to "deal" with the paradoxes informing projects.

Nevertheless, understanding project practice as driven by paradoxes has made me more sensitive to what goes on in the local interactions in my projects. Although I am using the same methods and tools, paying attention to how we negotiate their usage leads me to do my job slightly differently. The way that I approach and plan projects, or the way that I prepare and do my workshops and trainings, or the way that I conceive my responsibilities as an expert consultant have changed due to this awareness of the paradoxical nature of project practice.

So, for example, understanding project success as emerging from a process of intersubjective conflicts has led me to rethink the 'iron triangle' concept (Atkinson 1999:341) which I described in my second research project as monopolising my attention and making me focus on implementing a fixed scope within a predefined timeframe and budget. Although I still define success criteria at the start of my projects together with key stakeholders today, I no longer consider project success as being reducible to a simple formula expressed in terms of time, budget and scope. Today, I rather see these criteria as a moving target whose meaning requires re-negotiation all the way through the project together with the other people who have a stake in the project.

Similarly, I no longer consider my project plans as inevitably leading to predefined success targets, and I don't interpret any deviations from it as a problem to be solved. Rather, I recognise these deviations, as breakdowns, as opportunities to re-think and re-negotiate the project plans and examine how the meaning of success is affected in the context of the new situation.

I now recognise that I cannot fully control what is going on in my projects, and I no longer see my own striving for rational control as an attempt to secure project outcomes but rather as a way to satisfy my own need to control others and my own anxieties. This leads me to rethink what control means for me in my projects and what it might mean for others when I attempt to exercise control over them. It makes me become more aware of how I misrecognise others when I merely focus on success criteria, plans or when I try to make them do things which they otherwise would not necessarily do. It makes me become more aware of my ethical responsibility towards others, being concerned about how my interventions as consultant may affect them.

It also makes me become increasingly aware of my own breakdowns while I participate in practice, no longer perceiving them as something to avoid, especially when they are related to unexpected occurrences which make me feel uncomfortable. I rather consider them as valuable sources for inquiry into sedimented patterns of behaviour which no longer help to explain what happens around me.

In summary, this paradoxical understanding of practice leads me to participate in my projects in other ways. Not as a new intentional approach, but rather sharpening my awareness of what is going on in me and around me. Understanding projects as complex responsive processes of relating invites me take my interactions with others more seriously and to be more aware of my own role in these relationships and of the consequences that my gestures might have for others. These may appear to only be small changes in my way of practicing project management, but these small changes in my thinking and behaviour may be amplified in producing significant different ways of engaging together.

8. Contribution to Theory

Introduction

In this thesis I described how I struggled with the prescriptions provided by contemporary project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009, Agile Alliance Organisation 2001) due to their strong emphasis on methods and tools. Although these project management methodologies may differ in how they approach projects, through their use of different methods and tools, I concluded, building on Stacey's (2011) analysis of contemporary management theories, that they share very similar ontological assumptions.

Contemporary project management theories tend to perceive projects as holistic systems (Patzak & Rattay 2004:29, Sutherland 2012:5, Garel 2013:663) build of parts which just need to be assembled by someone correctly applying the prescribed methods and tools From such a systemic, linear and individualistic perspective, knowledge already exists and may be discovered by taking a detached, and thus seemingly objective position, and allowing the results to be transferred from one person to another ('sender-receiver model', Shannon & Weaver 1963), Stacey 2011:199–200, Griffin 2002:2–6, Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:31–32).

In contrast to this systemic understanding of project management, in this research I build on very different ontological and epistemological assumptions going back to Hegel's dialectic logic, which I believe provides new and interesting insights into the conceptualisation of project management.

Conceptualising Projects as Social Processes

In this thesis, I propose that projects emerge from a complex social process, itself arising from many conflictual local interactions where people enable and constrain each other, thus generating social patterns of behaviour which in turn form the local interactions that created them (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:186–191). This nonlinear process of human relating is always in a state of becoming and, although more or less influenceable from within the process, it cannot be reliably predicted or controlled by anyone (Stacey 2011, Griffin 2002, Mowles 2015a).

This understanding of practice as arising from local interactions also prompts us to understand knowledge as socially constructed and emerging from the same local interactions in practice (Gherardi 2009:117). Thus, knowledge cannot simply be discovered through objective analysis from outside the process and transferred to others in the form of universal methods, as assumed in the systemic world view.

In the "research method" section of this thesis, I described how this perception of projects as processes led me to focus my research on the local interactions in which project management methods and tools are functionalised, rather than concentrating on identifying another best practice. This processual ontology, with its focus on how practice emerges from nonlinear and conflictual local interactions, may thus shift the focus of project management practitioners from trying to understand what we should be doing to what we actually do when engaging with others.

Theory and Practice - the Same Processual Phenomenon

Understanding projects as social processes also leads to a different understanding of how theory and knowledge develop. In systems thinking, the knower and the known are assumed to be independent from each other, and consequently knowing develops by deliberately detaching oneself from what is going on in practice, analysing it and identifying new models. Such a view separates theorising from practice (Griffin 2002:14).

In process thinking (Elias 1997), the knowing subject, as a participant in the process, is itself part of the object to be known, and thus is being influenced by this object while simultaneously influencing it (Griffin 2002:14,140). I therefore concluded that, from a process perspective, theory and practice are inseparably related. Theory should thus be perceived as an abstract generalisation which only forms and becomes meaningful in relation to practice, as both are part of the same nonlinear process of thinking and acting.

This processual conception of human development thus means that theories cannot be deduced purely from detached observation, but rather, as argued by Elias (1956:226), arise from within practice in a movement of detached involvement. Feldman & Orlikowski (2011:1241) therefore call for the need of a 'practice theory', which they

describe as a theory that is related to everyday actions, which rejects dualisms and accentuates the relational mutuality to practice.

I gather from this that in the field of project management, a theory of knowledge is required where theory and practice are related and knowledge arises from the nonlinear interplay between thinking and acting while engaging in the complex processes of human interaction.

In this thesis, I therefore argue that project management theories require another ontological and epistemological understanding, one that refrains us from resolving the conflictual tension between theory and practice, and that acknowledges that both develop from the same complex social process of human interactions. I believe that a research which builds on such an ontological and epistemological understanding has more potential to lead to knowledge that is meaningful to practitioners than the detached and theoretical research approaches commonly used in contemporary project management theories.

Role of Breakdowns and Emotions in Theory

In this thesis, I have discussed in detail how in the conflictual relationship between detached thinking and absorbed involvement, practice and theory evolve (Heidegger 1962, Dewey 1922, Bourdieu 1990, Elias 1956, Mowles 2015a). This leads me to another key concept that plays a significant role in theorising, and that is largely ignored in contemporary project management theories, namely the role of emotions in conceptualising project management.

I have mentioned previously how emotions are part and parcel of the process of meaning-making through explaining the concept of breakdown from practice. Building mainly on Heidegger's (1962) and Dewey's (1922) concepts of the development of practice, I identified breakdowns from practice as a prerequisite for provoking thinking, and this concept therefore also plays an important role in theorising. I recommended, following Heidegger's (1962) and Dewey's (1992) arguments, that we should take our breakdowns from practice more seriously and consider unexpected situations in our lives which matter to us and make us think about what is going on. I showed that these

breakdowns that emerge from practice may raise many kinds of emotions, from anger to happiness.

I concluded, drawing on Burkitt (2012), that thinking is thus inextricably intertwined with emotions. It is through experiencing emotional breakdowns that thinking and theorising is stimulated, and not, as commonly assumed in contemporary project management theories, simply as a result of a deliberate and rational choice. In my fourth research project, I described how I tried to implement a particular project approach and focused on these abstract generalisations. In doing this, I ignored my own breakdowns and the emotions that I experienced when people colluded to counter my arguments, or when they simply did not follow my recommendations, or when they tried to avoid me during my visits. Taking these breakdowns and emotions seriously in these moments might have led me to doubt about our way to work together, to challenge my role as a consultant in this process, and enable me to negotiate with the participants to find other, potentially more meaningful ways to engage in our practice. In this sense, following Simpson's (2009) argument, I think that the conceptualisation of project management practice is first and foremost a research into our own breakdowns and emotions.

This important role of emotional breakdowns is largely overlooked in contemporary project management theories. In these theories emotions play a subordinate role and are commonly considered to hinder the efficient operation of projects. I believe that this thesis contributes to existing project management theories in that it emphasises the inevitable role of emotions in this process of noticing what is going on in practice and making sense of things that are worth theorising about.

Paradoxes in Project Management

The enabling and constraining potential of conflictual relationships leads me to emphasise the role of paradox as a special form of contradiction (Mowles 2015a:13) in the conceptualisation of project management. As mentioned previously in this thesis, the systemic view informing contemporary project management theories keeps the extremes of conflictual tensions separate by applying an "either…or" or an alternating "both… and" categorisation, thus favouring a dualist thinking. In this way of thinking, conflicts are considered as disruptive to efficient processing, which is believed to be achievable only through harmonious relationships. However, this leads to resolving the conflictual

tensions that in process thinking are considered to be the essence of human development (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000:105, Griffin (2002:190)).

In this thesis, I propose another way to theorise project management which avoids the dualisms commonly informing contemporary project management theories (PMI 2013, IPMA 2010, Prince2 2009, Agile Alliance Organisation 2001), for example, between thinking and acting (Dewey 1922), or between detachment and involvement (Elias 1956), or between the social and the individual (Elias 1997), or between subject and object (Elias 1956). Instead, I build on a "both…and, at the same time" thinking (Griffin 2002:13) which I believe has a generative potential to transform practice into novel patterns.

What this thesis then contributes to the theory of project management is primarily a conception of project management based on a logic of paradox. Project management practice is understood to develop as a social process of human relating emerging through the paradoxical interplay of mutually exclusive but still co-existing and reciprocally conditioning forces. Such a complex understanding of the nature of project management changes our view on projects and project management theories in significant ways. Projects are no longer predictable events that can be easily planned, where success is defined through rigid success criteria. They can no more be considered controllable simply through applying linear methods and tools. Rather, projects need to be understood as arising from complex social processes and as such are predictable and unpredictable, controllable and not controllable all at the same time.

I believe that my inquiries into the paradoxical social reality of technology-driven change projects bring forth some interesting insights into how to conceptualise contemporary theories in this field in a way that is more meaningful for practitioners.

9. Glossary

Agile Manifesto	In 2001, seventeen representatives from various software development schools of thought met to define the key principles of what they termed an 'agile' approach to uncover better ways of developing software. They defined four principles which inform most contemporary agile software development methodologies: - Individuals and interactions over processes and tools - Working software over comprehensive documentation - Customer collaboration over contract negotiation - Responding to change over following a plan (http://agilemanifesto.org, retrieved May, 15th 2018).
Agile Alliance Organisation	This is a nonprofit organisation promoting agile values, principles and practices. It has been founded in 2001 by some of the original authors of the Agile Manifesto (referring to themselves as the Agile Alliance) as a permanent organisation to disseminate information about agile methods and tools (https://www.agilealliance.org/the-alliance/, retrieved May,15th 2018).
agile software development	A term used in software development to denote approaches which build on the key principles of the Agile Manifesto. Agile software development stands for 'adaptive planning, evolutionary development, early delivery, and continual improvement, and […] rapid and flexible response to change' and emphasises the potential of 'collaborative effort of self-organizing and cross-functional teams'.(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agile_software_development, retrieved May 15th 2018).

IPMA	The International Project Management Association was founded in 1965 and is a federation of predominantly European national project management associations which develop project management competences in their geographic areas of influence. They build on a common body of knowledge (IPMA Competence Baseline) and promote a four level certification programme for project managers (http://www.ipma.world/about-us/ipma-international/, retrieved May, 15th 2018).
Iron Triangle	Also referred to as the Project Management Triangle or the Triple Constraint. It is a project management model describing the three main constraints of projects and assuming that - projects are restricted by time, cost and scope/quality - these constraints must be kept in a balance - the project manager is able to trade between these constraints (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_management_triangle, retrieved May 15th, 2018).
PMI	The Project Management Institute was founded in 1969 in the United States and has established a substantial project management body of knowledge (The PMBOK Guide). PMI is largely recognised as providing a global standard in the project management profession and has 2.9 million professionals promoting the PMI standards in most countries of the world. (https://www.pmi.org/about/learn-about-pmi, retrieved May, 15th 2018).

PRINCE2	PRINCE2 is an acronym for PRojects IN Controlled Environments and is a process model for structuring and organising projects. The first version of this model (PRINCE) has been invented by the UK government in 1989 as a best-practice standard for projects in the public domain. In 1996 a new version, labelled PRINCE2, has been published. PRINCE2 mainly covers UK and northern European countries (https://www.prince2.com/uk/what-is-prince2, retrieved May, 15th 2018).
Plan-driven projects	Plan-driven project management (also know as **waterfall** project management approaches) stand for a linear sequential project approach in which one project phase follows another based on a pre-set design captured in the form of a project plan. Such an approach builds on the hypothesis that late changes in the engineering process are more difficult, and thus more expensive to compensate than if anticipated in early project phases. It is a highly structured approach finding its origins in manufacturing and construction projects and has also become very popular in IT projects. Nowadays this approach is increasingly replaced by agile approaches, which are considered to be more flexible and thus better able to deal with the uncertainties encountered in project environments (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waterfall_model, retrieved May, 15th 2018).

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