

From the Iron Triangle to the Hermeneutic Circle: Redescribing IT Project Management Competency

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Abstract

The central claim of this dissertation is that contemporary IT project management is largely practised within the constraint of a dominant discipline, that of the 'scientific' project manager, for whom projects are defined in terms of the 'iron triangle' of time, cost and performance. It argues that identification with that archetype has been a limiting factor in the development of project management as a sophisticated human practice.

Building on work already done in expanding the field, this dissertation argues for the inclusion of alternative disciplines within the overall project management framework, and proposes philosophical hermeneutics as one such approach. Richard Rorty's particular pragmatic variation of philosophic hermeneutics, which he calls 'redescription', is offered as an addition to the literature on alternative frameworks to support the practice of project management.

Interviews with 'virtuoso' IT project managers reflect the presence of Rortian themes in their everyday activities. Through their own voices, virtuoso project managers demonstrate that much of what they practise could already be considered 'redescription'. However, the way in which the language of positivist scientific forms of project management dominate the practice make it difficult to embrace this alternative dimension of their work.

The result of this is a practice poorly equipped to deliver projects successfully in an increasingly complex and uncertain corporate IT environment. In advocating redescription, this dissertation does not seek to replace the corpus of formal project management theory. Rather, it seeks to highlight its shortcomings in a way that inscribes positivist scientific forms of Project Management within the framework of a greater hermeneutic whole, and affords project managers the opportunity to escape the limitations of the 'iron triangle'.

Statement of Originality

This work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institute. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the dissertation contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the dissertation itself. I also certify that the dissertation has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the dissertation itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the dissertation.

Bradley Rolfe

Publications and Papers

An earlier draft of Chapter 2, "A Practice in Crisis", was presented as a paper titled "Richard Rorty and the Limits of Project Management" at the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy Conference held at the University of Auckland on 3–5 December 2008. A revised version is due to be published as "From the Iron Triangle to the Hermeneutic Circle" in *Management Enquiry and Creative Destruction: Existential Skills for Enquiring Managers, Researchers and Educators*, edited by Dr Steven Segal.

An earlier draft of Chapter 3, "A Genealogy of Project Management", was presented as a paper titled "Reflect or Defend: Project Management as an Existential Response to Organisational Crisis" at the Philosophy of Management Conference held at St Anne's College, Oxford University, UK on 23–26 July 2009. It was published with the same title in *Philosophy of Management*, Volume 10, Issue 3, pp.59–78.

An earlier draft of Chapter 4, "Opening the Space of Project Management", was presented as a joint paper with Dr Steven Segal with the same title at the 6th Critical Management Studies Conference held at Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, UK on 13–15 July 2009. It was published as a joint paper with Dr Steven Segal with the same title in *Philosophy of Management*, Volume 10, Issue 1, pp.43–60.

An earlier draft of Part II (chapters 6, 7 and 8), "A Virtuoso Competency Framework for Project Management Practice", was presented as a paper titled "Doing Project Management Ironically" at the 26th International Project Management Association World Congress, Greece on 29–31 October 2012 and was published under the same name in the *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences Journal*, Vol 74, pp.185–194.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this dissertation represents the culmination of a project that I began over 12 years ago, when I first considered the possibility of researching, writing and teaching in the field of project management. At that time I began tertiary studies in project management with a view to one day completing a PhD and making my own contribution to the practice that I have made my working life.

It was far from a solo journey though, and I owe thanks to many people who have made this possible for me. Dr Steven Segal, my supervisor, mentor and friend through both my Masters and Doctoral dissertations, and whose genuine commitment to the betterment of our practices through philosophical reflection remains a source of inspiration for me. Dr Claire Jankelson, my co-supervisor, whose dedication to the crafted word and passion for phenomenological research has likewise sustained me. Skye Cleary (nee Nettleton), my close colleague, friend and philosopher whose insights did much to improve the arguments contained in this dissertation and whose own PhD remains a benchmark for me. My fellow travellers in the 'Hermeneutic Circle', whose monthly workshops provided a place for me to share and explore ideas in a collegial setting. My parents, Bill and Joan, and my sisters, Kathleen and Erin, who despite my previous unsuccessful forays into music and art as a teenager, supported me unflinchingly when I informed them of my intent to pursue research in existential philosophy. Finally, I would like to thank all my extended family amongst the Rolfe's, the Dart's, the Walker's and the Toohey's, and my friends including Bianca Wirth, Joana Santos, Dunstan De Sousa, Reece and Shelley Coleman, Jules Jones, Nicholas Parkhill, Erin Keneally, Phil Zornes, Steve Andersen and others too numerous to mention by name, who, at one time or another, endured a conversation involving 'existential hermeneutics', 'ironism' or 'phenomenology'. It is over now, so feel free to invite me for dinner again.

Most especially though to my wife, Christine, who listened faithfully as I recited passages from my work (though not while she was driving) and remained my rock throughout those, thankfully infrequent, moments of self-doubt when I wondered why I had started all this in the first place. My life would have been immeasurably smaller without you.

Ethics Committee Approval

Ethics approval for the field-work involved in this dissertation was obtained from the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee - Reference: 5201000675(D)

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“If we could witness the eventual fate of every one of our projects, we would have no choice but to succumb to immediate paralysis. Would anyone who watched the departure of Xerxes’ army on its way to conquer the Greeks, or Taj Chan Ahk giving orders for the construction of the golden temple of Cancuen, or the British colonial administrators inaugurating the Indian postal system, have had it in their hearts to fill their passionate actors in on the eventual fate of their efforts?”

Alain De Botton – *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (p.326)

“To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately”

Richard Rorty – *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (p.378)

Preface: The Author's Professional Narrative

By 2005 I was in my early 30s and had been a project management specialist for 10 years. I had moved into the area sideways out of software development. Whilst I enjoyed programming initially, I soon grew bored of the repetitiveness of it and gravitated towards the organisational aspects of the work. It was not really a deliberate decision, more a gradual realisation that I gained a lot more satisfaction from solving complex problems with disparate groups of people than solving complex problems with software code. I took my work seriously and completed a number of technical courses oriented towards the specific skill set of project management. I worked hard and eventually gained something of a reputation in the organisations I worked for as someone who could 'deliver'. Despite this, I rarely stayed long in a single company. I was always keen to move on to the next challenge and work with a new group of people. At this stage of my career I felt like I was at the top of my game and I generally gained immense satisfaction in the work I did.

It was around this time that I considered doing an MBA. I had wanted to do one for a long time. I dropped out of my bachelor's degree back in Canberra when I was a teenager, and my lack of tertiary qualifications had always been a source of concern for me. I was worried that it would weaken my prospects in terms of potential career advancement. Also, as the projects I worked on became larger, and the budgets grew accordingly, I felt an understanding of the 'broader' aspects of management, beyond the bounds of simple project management methodology (in which I was well versed) would help me considerably. Underpinning this basic desire was also something more fundamental. As the projects I ran got larger and more complex the less able I was to 'deliver' with the same confidence I had done earlier in my career. There were so many different stakeholders that I had to deal with from so many different areas, and the methods I followed did not seem to help in dealing with them. They didn't care about the correct way of running a project, they just wanted what they thought they needed.

The MBA course presented me with new perspectives on my work. For the first time I was able to step back from my actions to see them through other eyes. The various management theorists, philosophers and sociologists that we studied offered new visions of my work that expanded what might be possible. Yet I could still not articulate why those visions were unachievable for me. They remained more like intellectual curiosities, something I could ponder on as an escape from work rather than something that I could make tangible. As the course progressed the unease that had existed about my relationship to my work began to grow. It had always been a background kind of uneasiness and there was no specific event, no single catalyst for what I was feeling. Projects and companies had come and gone for me so frequently that by the time I began my MBA, I had worked for over a dozen. There had been little time to stop along the way and examine the nature of my work and consider what it meant to me. The first decade or so of my working life had spanned the 'golden years' of IT contracting in Sydney, with massive expenditure on projects such as Y2K driving something of a project management boom. The next contract and the next project had always beckoned, offering the chance to expunge whatever sins and glories I had earned and start again. Yet, the uneasiness was always there in the background. I couldn't name it exactly. It was something like a nagging feeling that there was something slightly 'off' about the nature of my work.

After completing my MBA I took up a role as senior project manager for a medium-sized consulting firm. I was enthusiastic about the job, keen to demonstrate what I had learned and contribute my skills to the company's success. I was determined to make a go of the role, and bring everything I had learned to my MBA to bear on the projects I was running. And at first, all had gone pretty well. After six months I was offered a permanent position at the firm, managing the professional services consulting team along with the project I was already managing. Slowly, I began to think that my days of moving from contract to contract might be over, and that I had found a company in which I could settle down and make a difference.

The project I was managing at the time was for our biggest customer, a NSW government department. They were engaged in a three-year program of work to upgrade their entire IT infrastructure. As was usual with such programs, the work was split into multiple phases, with potential tenderers having to bid on each phase individually, rather than the whole program being awarded at the outset to a single supplier. My firm had been successful in winning phase 1 of the bid, which was to construct the core network on which the remaining phases would be built. Whilst there were numerous issues (relating largely to the age of the network we were replacing), I worked hard to establish a good relationship with the client, and we were ultimately able to deliver this phase to their satisfaction. As a result, my company felt we were in an extremely strong position to successfully bid on phase 2.

I did not share their confidence, however, and pointed out some of the problems we were facing to our General Manager. Principal amongst these was the classic problem of actually knowing too much about the customer. As the incumbent, we had significant knowledge of the issues that we would face with upgrading their ageing IT network, and could factor this in when building our estimates for phase 2. Unfortunately, our competitors in the bidding for phase 2 did not have the same insights and were therefore likely to bid much lower than we did for the work. My proposed solution was to encourage our client to reveal some of the fundamental issues around their network to the competing bidders so that they could make the appropriate estimates. The client argued, though, that the successful bidder would have a due diligence period in which to adjust their bid and allow for such issues.

The problem, as I put it to my General Manager, was that in order to be the successful bidder in the first place, we would have to ignore our initial understanding of their network and underestimate the work involved. As the bid manager and project manager for the work, this did not sit well with me. The second problem we faced was that the client had specified a fixed start date for phase 2 rather than a two- to three-month 'ramp-up' period following the contract award, as was the norm. This meant we would have to engage the

additional project resources prior to winning the bid. For an organisation our size this was a considerable risk.

Despite my reservations, we went ahead with the phase 2 bid. With my team I produced an estimate based on our intimate understanding of the network and the inherent problems we faced in upgrading it. I thought it was reasonable and provided sufficient detail so that the customer could understand what was driving the cost. The sales team saw it differently, however, and sided with the General Manager in insisting that we underestimate in order to remain competitive. I argued hard that we stood to make a substantial loss, and that no amount of renegotiation after the award of the bid would make up the difference in cost. Ultimately I was ignored, and the bid went ahead with a substantially reduced estimate. In the meantime I was directed to expand my team to cater for the increased workload that would result from our expected win.

When our customer announced that we had lost the bid and the contract had been awarded to our competitor, the reaction was palpable. With the loss of our major customer the firm had, overnight, gone from a position of growth to one of decline. When we queried the outcome with our client, it turned out that our competitor had underbid us by more than 50%! I later remember having a drink with our customer's Chief Technology Officer at the Phase 1 completion party (a very bittersweet moment for me) and asking him whether a bid so much lower than ours had caused him any concern. Did he think that our competitor had misunderstood the work involved? He replied he was certain they had but he had no choice, he would be inviting probity investigations if he declined a bid under such circumstances.

Compounding our issues was the fact I had hired additional resources to do work that was no longer there. In the space of a single day I was forced to retrench eight people in my group that I had personally hired. Whilst few of them had worked at the company for a particularly long time, and all were highly skilled and more than capable of finding other work, the sense of failure

I felt was debilitating. That sense of failure was amplified shortly afterwards when I was retrenched as well.

Strangely, it should not have been the soul-crushing experience it was. I had held very few permanent positions over the years and to be 'right-sized' or 'down-sized', or whatever other euphemism was currently in favour, should not have mattered to me. Typically my contracts expired every 12 months or so anyway. Except this time something was different. The unease I felt about my work had started to coalesce and manifest itself in a variety of ways including frustration, contempt and dissatisfaction.

What had changed for me? I had moved on with ambivalence from projects before; sometimes the decision was mine, sometimes not. I had acted no differently on this project than I had on any other. I'd exercised my skills as professionally as I was able and I was considered good at my job. That the project had failed should have been of little or no concern for me. I had done my due diligence by preparing all the estimates and plans in good faith and had done so in a way that was in accordance with the methods of my profession. I had not set the price or the criteria for success with the customer. Yet the project had failed and I was, unlike the times before, deeply concerned with that failure in a way I could not express.

This unease has continued with me to the present. It has proved impossible to name exactly what it is. Perhaps it is easier to name what it is not. It is not a 'mid-life crisis' (as some friends to whom I had mentioned this had helpfully suggested). There are no problems with my life, health or marriage. Outside of my work, everything is fine. I am married to my best friend, I travel with her and generally enjoy everything life has to offer. At a certain level everything at work is fine too. It's not like I'm crying at my desk every day. I attend meetings, facilitate discussions, organise workshops, make phone calls, send emails and deal with all the other minutiae of working life in the same way as I have always done.

Yet my relationship with my work is broken somehow and I do not have the words to describe it, let alone 'fix' it. I do not know if there is something there to be described or 'fixed' or, if there is, what that could possibly look or feel like. I have become jealous of some of my colleagues for whom this problem appears to be untranslatable. They seem to derive the meaning from their work that I somehow lack. However, I also notice there are many others like me who do not. I am concerned that to feel concerned about this is to indulge in a kind of 'yuppie moaning' that I am intolerant of in others. I work in a well-paid office job that a lot of people would love to have, and complaining about it seems inappropriate. Yet there it is. The unspeakable constantly speaking to me. It continues to pervade the work I am doing ... and in fact has given rise to further sets of questions regarding project management, questions that occupy my mind even as I continue in my work.

Part I
The Problem of Project Management

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 The Contribution of the Research

The original contribution to knowledge of this dissertation is the application of Richard Rorty's philosophical hermeneutic of redescription to project management practice in order to articulate virtuoso practitioner competencies.

Rorty argues that individuals who see the language in which their meanings and values are expressed as contingent are in a position to redescribe. That is, they do not see the terms of their language as expressing eternal truths, or in any way corresponding directly to reality. As Rorty puts it: "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" (1989:73). Rorty calls such people Ironists. Ironists do not believe there is such a thing as a 'final vocabulary' that fixes the meaning of something for all time. Whilst a dialogue continues, Rorty argues, there is always an opportunity to redescribe our meanings (Rorty 1989). 'Meaning' is thus revealed to be highly contingent and situated rather than fixed or immutable. The implication of redescription for project management practice is the possibility of renegotiating 'taken for granted' meanings in the context of corporate projects.

In applying redescription to IT project management practice, this dissertation addresses a theoretical gap in project management knowledge identified in a series of workshops, titled "Rethinking Project Management", conducted by the United Kingdom Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council between 2004 and 2006. The network of researchers attending these workshops sought "to identify and define a new inter-disciplinary research agenda aimed at enriching and extending the subject beyond its current foundations."¹ As contributors to the workshops, Cicmil, Williams, Thomas and Hodgson (2006) argued for "an alternative lens through which new insights into projects and

¹ Refer to the web-site at: <http://gow.epsrc.ac.uk/NGBOViewGrant.aspx?GrantRef=GR/S64363/01>

project management practice can be generated" (p.684) and proposed research that "takes seriously practitioners' lived experience of projects" (p.675).

This dissertation takes up the proposal for an 'alternative lens', and has sought to generate project management competencies that are situated in the day-to-day practices of project managers. It does so by employing a range of philosophical tools that have not typically been applied, in this particular way, to research in this area. The tools are themselves broadly contained within the field of 'interpretive' research. These tools are used to both challenge existing assumptions and premises, and explore alternative approaches to the manner in which project management practice is conceived.

1.2 Principal Thesis and Supporting Arguments

The principal thesis of this dissertation is that project management as a practice is currently articulated as a 'procedural' discipline based on scientific principles, when it would be better articulated as an 'interpretive' one based on hermeneutic principles.

Whilst project management practice has been characterised in project management literature as an abstract and universal method requiring the application of discrete technical knowledge, it is in fact a highly situated, fluid and contextual activity (Flyvbjerg 2001, Cicmil 2006, Thomas 2006). This dissertation demonstrates how practitioner competencies based solely on procedural expertise have been inadequate in dealing with the highly complex and uncertain nature of projects in the contemporary corporate environment.

This central thesis contains a number of supporting arguments:

1. The high failure rate of contemporary projects can be attributed to the inadequacy of existing project management theory rather than its poor application in practice.

2. Existing project management language lacks a social and historical context to its construction that renders it inflexible in coping with the uncertainties and ambiguities of the modern corporate environment.
3. The existing procedural language of project management practice can be seen as an attempt to provide an overarching meta-language that renders all other specialist organisational languages commensurable with one another.
4. The negotiation of shared meaning amongst the multiple specialist languages of the modern organisation is the core competency of the project management practitioner, rather than their reduction to a single, dominant meaning.
5. Contemporary research into project management remains largely ignorant of the lived, actual experience of project managers as a source of edification and insight into project management practice.
6. It is in the disruption to their existing practices, and through reflection on that disruption, that project managers can begin to explore alternatives to the dominant, procedural language of project management.
7. An 'ironic' disposition, in the Rortian sense, towards the specialist languages of their organisation, including the language of project management, affords project manager practitioners the opportunity to practically cope with the disruption, uncertainty and ambiguity that is the hallmark of the modern corporate environment.

These arguments are developed using a range of methods directed towards developing a set of virtuoso competencies for project management practitioners that have their basis in the lived experience of project management practitioners.

Rather than rejecting existing Project Management competencies, as encapsulated in professional bodies of knowledge such as the Project Management Body of Knowledge (known as the 'PMBok' and published by the Project Management Institute), this dissertation builds upon existing procedural

frameworks by showing how they are 'stepping stones' to virtuoso levels of project management competence.

1.3 An Interpretive Research Approach to Project Management Practice

The research methods used in this dissertation are grounded in an interpretive research approach. Broadly speaking, an interpretive research approach allows "people [to] create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them. Interpretive researchers thus attempt to understand phenomena through accessing the meanings participants assign to them" (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991:35).

Thus far, there have been limited studies using interpretive techniques in project management research (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006c). In their review of the methodological underpinnings of research articles submitted to the International Journal of Project Management in 2005, Smyth and Morris (2007) noted less than 10% of the 68 papers reviewed had an interpretive methodological basis. This finding suggests there is a significant opportunity for research of the variety conducted in this dissertation.

Supporting this, Cicmil and Hodgson (2006) argue that an improved understanding of the 'actuality' of project management practice is essential to address the current limitations of the formal project management method. They contend that such an understanding requires acknowledgement of the complexity of the modern corporate environment in which projects operate and the need for an "integrative pragmatic theory and the development of social knowledge and wisdom relevant to the context of project management practice" (p.677). Theory based on the actuality of projects would recognise the necessity of the formal project management method, but also allow for the utilisation of alternative methods within the practice (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas and Hodgson 2006).

1.4 Research Influences: The Voice of the Practitioner

My interest in interpretive research had its origins in research I did in Australian history as a young man at high school in Canberra. Works such as "The Broken Years" by Bill Gammage (1974) and "The Fatal Shore" by Robert Hughes (1987) serve as exemplars of the kind of research that moves beyond the mere incantation of facts and theories, and renders visceral the human element in the area of study. Using the medium of hundreds of letters and diaries of soldiers and convicts who had actually lived through those times, Gammage and Hughes were able to imbue the histories of the Great War and the early Australian convict years with an immediacy and richness not available through other research methods.

Later in life, as I participated in the MBA program at Macquarie University, I was exposed to further research in an interpretive vein, and was again struck by the power of human stories to generate insight and understanding that simple theory could not accomplish alone. Up until this point, I had not considered applying research of this type in the area of management, dominated as it was by quantitative techniques. However, work by Segal (2004) and Jankelson (2005) in the area of hermeneutics, phenomenology and leadership convinced me that such techniques were both applicable and, in fact, necessary in the discipline of project management.

Whilst project management in a modern corporation does not necessarily contain the same element of human drama brought about by the horrendous deprivations of war or penal servitude, it is a human practice nonetheless, and one deserving of a human voice.

1.5 The Research Objective: *Phronesis*

As stated earlier in the introduction, a number of different methods are utilised within this dissertation to support the research aims. These methods are genealogy, phenomenology and hermeneutics. All of these methods are

contained within the broad category of 'interpretive' research (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006) and are developed through the work of a number of authors, but primarily Friedrich Nietzsche (1969), Eugene Gendlin (1981), Richard Rorty (1979, 1989) and Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (2004b).

Initially, difficulty arose in 'linking' these methods within a coherent research framework, beyond the fact that they were all examples of interpretive research. However, support was found for doing so in the work of Bent Flyvbjerg (2001, 2012) and his research into mega-projects, and in particular in his research into a major town-planning project in the Danish city of Aalborg. Flyvbjerg linked the methods of Nietzsche, Gendlin, Rorty and the Dreyfus brothers together, either explicitly or implicitly, by attributing to all of them the shared aim of *phronesis*:

Phronesis thus concerns the analysis of values –“things that are good or bad for man” – as a point of departure for action ... it focuses on what is variable, on that which cannot be encapsulated by universal rules, on specific cases. *Phronesis* requires an interaction between the general and the concrete; it requires consideration, judgment, and choice. More than anything else, *phronesis* requires *experience*. (Flyvbjerg, 2001:53)

Flyvbjerg explains that *phronesis*, as originally conceived by Aristotle, stood in relation to *episteme* and *techne* as the three intellectual virtues. *Episteme* is essentially scientific knowledge. This kind of knowledge is universal, abstract and context independent. *Techne* is essentially art or craft. It is the knowledge pertinent to the construction of goods and is therefore governed by the specific goal of construction. *Phronesis* is ethical in its orientation. It concerns the deliberation about values in the context of an orientation towards action. Whilst both of the terms *episteme* and *techne* have come down to us in the modern terms 'epistemology' and 'technology', Flyvbjerg notes that the original word of *phronesis* has no “analogous contemporary term” (p.53).

Phronesis, Flyvbjerg argues, “goes beyond both analytical, scientific knowledge (episteme) and technical knowledge or know-how (episteme)”. He goes on to

say, “phronesis is commonly involved in social practice, and that therefore attempts to reduce social science and theory either to *episteme* or *techne*, or to comprehend them in those terms, are misguided” (p.4). *Phronesis*, therefore, can be understood as a form of practical coping or wisdom that is contextual, deeply rooted in human experience and directed towards action (Flyvbjerg 2001).

Genealogy, phenomenology and hermeneutics stand as forms of phronetic research, aimed at generating the kind of knowledge that allows a human being to cope practically with the uncertainty and ambiguity of human experience (Flyvbjerg 2001). This dissertation seeks to encapsulate this kind of understanding in virtuoso competencies of project management practice.

1.6 The Five-Layer Model of Skills Acquisition and the Virtuoso Practitioner

Cicmil (2006) adopts the Dreyfus model of learning acquisition for project management competency, and notes that the acquisition of skills relating to the procedural competencies outlined in such bodies of knowledge as the PMBoK and Prince2 guides are essential steps on the path from the novice to the virtuoso practitioner. In commenting on his original phenomenological learning model, Hubert Dreyfus (2004b) notes his debt to Martin Heidegger, and observes that Heidegger did not see the primordial understanding on which expert or virtuoso competencies are based, as “some radically different way of making sense of things”, but rather that “this higher intelligibility must somehow be based on and grow out of the average intelligibility into which everyone is socialized” (p.269). The implication of Dreyfus’s reading of Heidegger for the model of skills acquisition they developed is that each stage of acquisition is a necessary precursor to the next (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1980). Virtuoso competencies are not to be seen as a replacement for existing project management standards of competency, but as an enhancement to them (Cicmil 2006).

Cicmil's (2006) project management competency framework comprises five levels of competency that I adopt in this dissertation. Whilst the focus of the remaining chapters is on the development of a set of competencies at the 5th level (the expert or virtuoso), it is necessary to understand that an advanced level of competency cannot be developed in isolation, but is arrived at by progressing through more rudimentary levels.

Level 1 is that of a Novice, an individual who has gained a basic understanding of the traditional structures of project management through instruction or training courses such as Prince-2, PMBOK or Agile. The rules learned at this level are context independent and are applied with little reference to the particularity of a given situation.

Level 2 is an Advanced Beginner, who has begun to apply some of the learned rules in project scenarios and begun to contextualise them as the various categories of project become apparent to them through trial and error.

Level 3 is the Competent Performer, who has learned to filter the traditional principles of project management through the lens of experience and consciously invoke their judgment in relation to the goals of the project. They identify and prioritise the critical factors of the project swiftly and confidently.

Level 4 is the Proficient Performer, who understands the contingent and power-based aspects of the project environment and is able to respond critically, analytically and reflectively as a deeply engaged performer (Cicmil 2006).

The main focus is an examination of the Level 5 competencies, the Expert or Virtuoso Practitioner (from this point on, simply referred to as the 'virtuoso' practitioner). Cicmil (2006) sees the virtuoso project management practitioner as recognising the inseparability of thinking and doing, acknowledging the intrinsic relations between project, self and group and being able to perceive and manage situations "rapidly, intuitively, holistically, visually, bodily and relationally" (Cicmil 2006:35).

Cicmil (2006) argues that formal project management methods tend to concentrate on developing practitioner competencies around the lower levels of competency, and that there is a gap in project management research and practice around the development of competency at the more advanced levels. It is an essential feature of this dissertation, therefore, to develop Level 5 or 'virtuoso' competencies for project management practice to aid in addressing this gap. Through the development of project management competencies at this level project managers will be better equipped to deal with the increasingly complex and uncertain environments in which they operate, and start to address the high rate of contemporary project failure that is outlined in Chapter 2 – A Crisis of Practice.

1.7 The “Lived Experience” of the Project Management Practitioner

The virtuoso competencies of practice developed in Part II are derived, not from abstract reflection, but from the “lived experience” (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas and Hodgson 2006:685) of practising project managers. Lived experience is revealed through a series of phenomenological interviews. The interviews are used to explore the way in which experienced project managers use disruption to their practices to improve their practitioner skills, manage their stakeholders and their project, and ultimately improve their chances of success. The method utilised for the interviews is Gendlin’s (1981) phenomenology of focusing, which is developed in Chapter 4 – Opening the Space of Project Management. Focusing is an example of Dreyfus’s (1980, 2004) phenomenology of learning as it provides an example of the kind of reflective practice in which an expert or virtuoso project management practitioner would engage, in an effort to achieve an advanced understanding of their relationship to their practice.

I interviewed four project managers for this dissertation (I was also interviewed by my PhD supervisor, Steven Segal, the analysis from which is incorporated in the methodology outlined in Chapter 4). The interviews consisted of two

sessions of approximately an hour in length, conducted within three months of each other. I knew these project managers professionally, and this raises the issue of inherent bias.

According to Schwandt (2003), most research based in a scientific methodology would demand an *elimination* of bias. However, in the context of qualitative research of a more hermeneutic nature this is not always desirable or even possible. What is called for instead is an *account* of the bias, so that the reader can determine for themselves the suitability of the choices made in relation to the research objectives (Schwandt 2003). In accounting for my own bias, I acknowledge that the choice of project managers for the research was not random. They were chosen because they represented, via my personal knowledge, the kind of project management practitioner that I felt was concerned with, and prepared to reflect upon, the fundamentals of their field and their relationship to their practice. The only other criterion used in making the selection (apart from their willingness to be interviewed), was that they had been practising project management for at least 10 years. I considered 10 years a sufficient length of time for them to have mastered the formal aspects of their work, and at least begin to ponder some of the limitations of their chosen discipline.

Of the four individuals I interviewed, one was female and the others male. All were between the ages of 35 and 45 and all had tertiary education of one form or another (though none in the specific area of project management). All had worked for at least 6 companies during their career. Interestingly, none had started their career in the specific domain of IT and/or project management practice. One had been a lawyer, another an electrical engineer, the third an accountant and, finally, a real estate agent. All of them professed to “falling into” project management rather than actively pursuing it as a career option.

I conducted all of the interviews during the interviewees lunch hour, generally in a quiet café close to their work. Whilst this was not ideal, the circumstances of conducting research into the lives of busy professionals made it necessary.

As already outlined, I chose the interviewees because of their experience in the field of project management and their willingness to participate in this kind of study. Prior to beginning each interview I provided for the interviewee a description of the interview process. This was the hermeneutic phenomenological method of 'focusing' outlined in detail in Chapter 4. Before beginning I ensured they understood that the interview would be focussed on their relationship to project management, and that this relationship was an essential part of the methodological foundation of my thesis.

The interview itself proceeded via the method of focusing, with the primary aim being the uncovering of the 'felt sense' of the interviewees relationship to their work. As explained, each interview lasted approximately an hour and was recorded, with the interviewee's permission, on a dictation device. These recordings were later transcribed by a third party (recommended and approved by Macquarie University Research Office) and then provided back to me. At the time of publication the recordings and the only copy of the transcripts are held by me, on an encrypted hard-drive in my possession. Apart from myself and my transcriber, the only other individual who has sighted the transcripts is my supervisor.

The nature of the work of the interviewees made the details of their interviews commercially and professionally sensitive. The interviews were conducted in accordance with the obligations outlined by the Macquarie University ethical guidelines, though a number of additional precautions were taken by me to ensure that there was no possibility of the interviewee, their company, or any of the projects they worked on from being identified. This included changing the names of the interviewees in the text of the dissertation, along with some of the specifics of the projects they referred to, when I felt those specifics might identify the project. These specifics were typically quantifiable items (i.e. the dollar value of a project) that did not materially effect the qualitative analysis being undertaken. Even with these precautions, the possibility of the identification of projects, the project manager and their company remained and

accordingly, I have not included the full transcripts of the interviews in the dissertation itself.

Obviously, this raises questions of subjectivity, both in relation to my choice of interviewee, and the kind of data from the interviews I chose to include or not include in support of my thesis. On this point, Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) offers the following advice:

Like other good craftsmen, all that researchers can do is use their experience and intuition to assess whether they believe a given case is interesting in a paradigmatic context, and whether they can provide collectively acceptable reasons for their choice of case. (p.77)

Accordingly, wherever I thought the voice of the practitioner yielded insight or even 'richness' to the context of the research, I included it. Ultimately, the overall effect I sought was an analysis of the data that was convincing in its structured coherence (Todres 2007). Whatever pre-conceptions I may have held about the kind of data the interviewees would provide, it bore little resemblance to what was finally captured. Again, Flyvbjerg (2001) supports this understanding when he observes:

According to Campbell, Charles Ragin, Clifford Geertz, Michel Wieviorka, and others, researchers who have conducted intensive, in-depth case studies typically report that their pre-conceived views, assumptions, concepts and hypotheses were wrong and that the case material has forced them to revise their hypotheses on essential points. This is my own experience as well. (p.79)

Likewise, the voices of the project management practitioners I interviewed constantly surprised and challenged my existing assumptions. In particular, I was forced to accept that not all of the practitioners I interviewed were operating at the level of virtuoso practitioner, and that there were a number of critical junctures through which a practitioner needed to pass before they could be considered as operating at that level. The details of these findings and their

implications for project management practice, research and training, are developed in Part II and discussed in the conclusion to this dissertation.

Clarification is also required about the way in which I have structured the presentation of the competencies. Formal competencies are frequently presented as operating in a linear progression. Project management guides, such as the PMBoK (PMI 2013) or the Prince-2 (Bentley 2002), align practitioner competencies to the various 'stages' or 'functions' of the project (i.e. the 'planning' phase competencies are then followed by the 'execution' phase competencies or competencies relating to 'time' are dealt with separately to competencies relating to 'quality'). The virtuoso competencies I develop in Part II are done so within a structure of 'aspects' and 'layers', with each aspect consisting of multiple layers. The significant difference between this approach and that of a formal competency framework is that each of the aspects and layers of competency that I have envisaged potentially operates at the same time. Each aspect and its layers represents a different focus the project manager may have over a particular period, whether that is an hour, a day, a month or a year. Though they have to be presented within the confines of the dissertation in a linear fashion, the impression the dissertation hopes to convey is of competencies that are constantly developing through overlapping cycles, interoperating with one another over the course of a project or, indeed, many projects.

1.8 An Existential Hermeneutic Mode of Practice

As already stated, and as the following chapters show, it is in the moment of disruption to project management practice that the scientific language of project management fails the practitioner, and inhibits the possibility of the development of a virtuoso competency. The experiences of the project managers demonstrate how an existential hermeneutic mode of practice allows

the practitioner to articulate existential notions of disruption within their practice.

It was the insight gained from my own phenomenological 'focusing' session with my supervisor detailed in Chapter 3 that provided the theoretical basis for my particular approach to project management practice. The handle of 'translator' that I eventually arrived at through an attunement to my bodily felt sense provided me a starting point for looking at my practice differently. The idea of a project manager being a translator between the various specialist languages of an organisation immediately resonated with me and set the research direction for the remainder of my dissertation.

That research direction ultimately led to the field of existential hermeneutics and the philosophy of Richard Rorty. It is Rorty's particular pragmatic variation of existential hermeneutics, one he calls "redescription" (Rorty 1989:16), that I primarily use to language virtuoso competencies of project management. There are other theorists, however, whose work I also take advantage of. These include hermeneutic thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Alasdair Macintyre and Martin Heidegger (on whom much of Rorty's work is based), as well as other authors such as Thomas Kuhn, Friedrich Nietzsche and Eugene Gendlin. There are also, of course, a very large number of other writers in the area of philosophy, general management and project management whose work I draw on to support the research aims. These include Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, Svetlana Cicmil, Fernando Flores, Charles Spinosa, Damian Hodgson and Bent Flyvbjerg. Whilst not all of these would necessarily support every conclusion reached by Rorty or, indeed, every application to which I have put Rorty's ideas, I consider all of them to be what Trotsky calls "fellow travellers"². That is, I consider all of them to be sympathetic to a hermeneutic perspective on social practices, and it is ultimately this point that provides the research with its theoretical cohesiveness.

² Leon Trotsky (1924) "Literature and Revolution", Ch.2

It is important to note that the aim of my thesis is not existential hermeneutic scholarship, either generally, or on Rorty's theories specifically. It is in the *application* of Rorty's work to the practice of project management that I am interested. In Chapter 5 "The Philosophy of Ironism" I introduce Rorty's work in order to provide a theoretical framework for the interview data. As already stated, the purpose in doing so is to help articulate virtuoso competencies of project management practice as evidenced in the day-to-day activities of the project managers I have interviewed. An understanding of Rorty's philosophy is therefore essential for the specific practitioner scenarios it is being used to inform.

1.9 Structure of the Research: The Practice Dissertation

The overall structure of this dissertation is based on the "practitioner development through reflective practice" framework outlined by Crawford, Morris, Thomas and Winter (2006), who argue that suitably experienced practitioners can do more to develop their competencies through "reflective practice" and "experiential learning" than they otherwise might through the "classical" research dissertation. With this in mind they suggest the "practice dissertation" as a more relevant vehicle for a practitioner to engage with their practice and deal with the "messy, indeterminate situations" that are the hallmark of project management (p.728).

The practice dissertation involves a "cyclical process of learning and development involving four inter-related activities":

1. A consideration of the practitioner's role,
2. A literature review of the relevant themes,
3. The relation of the literature to actual practice, and
4. The modification of practices as a result of the learning (Crawford, Morris, Thomas and Winter 2006:728).

Accordingly, the preface to this dissertation provides a consideration of the practitioner's role in the form of the author's personal narrative. This narrative seeks to put into context the remainder of the dissertation by establishing its basis in the author's everyday experience of project management practice. In this case, the experience is one of profound disruption as I seek to make sense of my practice in the face of considerable uncertainty.

The postscript to the dissertation represents the final stage in the reflective project management practitioners "cyclical process of learning" and is the modification of practices as a result of the learning (Crawford, Morris, Thomas and Winter 2006). This is demonstrated via a second personal narrative that describes my attempts to implement in my day-to-day practices the results of the learning I experienced over the eight years I was researching and writing this dissertation.

The body of the dissertation consist of two parts, the first reviewing the relevant literature and the second relating the literature to actual practice.

Part I outlines the methods used to support this thesis and consists of four chapters.

Chapter 1, Introduction, outlines the contribution of the research, the research structure, and introduces the research framework within which the arguments of this dissertation will be developed. This is the phenomenological learning framework of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980), adapted for project management practice by Cicmil (2006).

Chapter 2, A Practice in Crisis, explores the current state of project management practice. It utilises Thomas Kuhn's theory from "the structure of scientific revolutions" (1996) to argue that contemporary project management practice is in a state of crisis comparable to that of late 19th century physics, and that an urgent revision of the paradigm that supports the practice is required.

Chapter 3, A Genealogy of Project Management, provides an understanding of the historical contingencies on which the present paradigm of project management is based. The genealogical method used in the chapter is based on Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogy from *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1969) and through engagement with issues of power, agency, contingency and historicity, reveals alternative histories of project management that have been largely hidden from practitioners and researchers.

Chapter 4, Opening the Space of Project Management, introduces the research method by which the lived experience of project managers is explored: Focusing. The Focusing method itself is grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, and the foundational work of Martin Heidegger is briefly outlined before elaborating the operationalisation of his thinking in the 'focusing' research technique of Eugene Gendlin (1996). The focusing technique was used to interview practicing project managers, the data from which was used to support the second part of this thesis.

Chapter 5, The Philosophy of Ironism, provides a more detailed outline of Richard Rorty's philosophy of 'ironism'. Ironism is Rorty's variation on an existential (or philosophical) hermeneutic.

Part II outlines the development of virtuoso project management competencies using the lived experience of project management practitioners, and it consists of four chapters.

Chapter 6, Attending to Practice, develops competencies around the practitioners' 'attentiveness' to their practice as a project manager. It explores skills related to the practitioner's attunement to the disruption that is a hallmark of contemporary projects, and their ability to reflect on that disruption and utilise it in the context of the specialist languages in the contemporary organisation.

Chapter 7, Redescribing the Practice, builds upon the virtuoso competency of attentiveness to practice, by pro-actively redescribing the project itself.

'Redescription' is Rorty's (1979) term for deploying metaphors in new ways to alter the perspective of language users. In order to redescribe the project practitioner must learn to operate in a state of ambiguity, whilst constantly negotiating and renegotiating shared meanings with project stakeholders.

Chapter 8, Enacting the Practice, develops competencies around the formulation of project practitioner identity. This aspect of competency involves practitioners recognising and maintaining the relationship between themselves as practitioners and the practice of which they are a part, through an appreciation of the different 'ways of being' that practitioners can adopt in their practice. Rorty (1989) presents us with two 'ways of being' within Ironism: the Strong Poet and the Ironic Liberal. Project practitioners must learn to maintain their professional identity or 'way of being', whilst operating in an environment of constantly negotiated meaning.

Chapter 9, Conclusion: Making Project Management Relevant, summarises the major arguments developed in the research and discusses their implications for both project management practice and future academic research in this area.

Chapter 2 – A Practice in Crisis

2.1 Introduction

From the time when a project was some monumental feat of construction like the Hoover Dam or the Great Wall, it now seems that every activity, no matter how insignificant, can be conceived of as a project. If there is a piece of work to be done in a corporation that does not immediately fit within the classification of an existing process, it will invariably be called a project. Some estimates suggest that 'projects' now constitute more than 50% of work undertaken within the contemporary corporate sector (Flyvbjerg 2012). Indeed, many companies such as IBM have made project management the focus of their operating model (Zwikael and Smyrk 2011).

Surprisingly, though, for such a ubiquitous method of organising work, 'Project Management' itself as a formal discipline did not come into existence until the 1950s (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b). It was during this period that extremely large and complex projects were undertaken by the US Department of Defense, such as the Polaris submarine and Apollo moon programs. It was in support of these programs that a number of new techniques, primarily in the area of scheduling, were developed. Principal among them was PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) that offered a probabilistic method for determining the likely duration of a project schedule (Weaver 2007).

Whilst the actual effectiveness of such techniques on the Polaris and Apollo programs is still debated (Koskela and Howell 2008), they quickly became popular, to the extent that their utilisation is now more or less identified with the practice of project management itself (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b).

Despite the existence of a widely utilised and agreed project management method, there is clear and compelling evidence that a significant rate of project failure exists in contemporary corporate practice across a wide range of industries. The Standish Group noted in their CHAOS summary report on IT industry projects that effective of 2009 there was:

A marked decrease in project success rates, with 32% of all projects succeeding which are delivered on time, on budget, and with required features and functions. 44% were challenged which are late, over budget, and/or with less than the required features and functions and 24% failed which are cancelled prior to completion or delivered and never used. (p.12)

Even more concerning, according to the Standish Report, is the fact that the rate of failure appears to be increasing:

These numbers represent a downtick in the success rates from the previous study, as well as a significant increase in the number of failures. They are a low point in the last five study periods. This year's results represent the highest failure rate in over a decade. (Standish Group 2009:12)

A joint study by McKinsey and the BT Centre for Major Program Management at the University of Oxford on 5,400 IT projects across a wide range of industries found similarly worrying results. Fifty per cent of projects with a budget of \$15m or over ran at least 45% over budget. They were delivered 7% behind schedule and delivered 56% less functionality than originally specified (Bloch, Blumberg and Laartz 2012).

Earlier studies by KPMG (1997) in Canada, OASIG (1995) in the UK, and Robbins-Gioia (2001) in the US arrived at similar conclusions as the Standish and BT/McKinsey reports. Information Technology projects have, on average, a better chance of failing than they do of succeeding. Nor is this failure rate isolated to the Information Technology sector. In research into large construction projects in over 20 nations, Flyvberg (2012) observed that "nine out of ten projects have cost overruns. Overruns of over 50% are common, while overruns of over 100% are not uncommon." Most significantly, he noted "overruns have been constant for the seventy years for which data are available, indicating that no improvements in estimating and managing costs have been made over time." (pp.104–105)

2.2 Trapped in the Iron Triangle

As a project management practitioner in the Australian IT industry for the last 20 years, my experience mirrors the studies above. Whilst I like to think of myself as good at my job, an honest assessment of my career would probably see me only slightly above the average success rates for the projects quoted earlier, at best.

I began my career in the early 1990s, first as a software developer and then gravitating quickly towards the organisational aspects of the work. A steady progression through the 'ranks' of project management then followed: technical planner, project co-ordinator, implementation manager (all essentially junior project manager roles) and then onto project manager, senior project manager and, my latest incarnation, program manager. Whilst the titles have changed, and the 17-odd organisations I have worked for have changed with them, the essential problem has always remained the same: How to give the stakeholders what they want? In the formal discipline of project management those wants are invariably translated into what was famously coined by Martin Barnes in 1972 as the 'iron triangle' of time, cost and performance³. Or, in other words, what do you want, when do you want it by, and how much do you want to pay? All of which sounds relatively simple.

Actually, it is far from simple. As the studies above have highlighted, and many of my colleagues and I can attest to, it is very, very hard to deliver a project of any reasonable size and complexity in any industry in the contemporary corporate environment. What's more, it is getting harder. One of the more disturbing findings in the Standish Group report mentioned above was that the rate of failure of projects was actually *increasing* (Group 2009). What could account for such an increase?

³ The author attended the 26th IPMA World Congress in Crete in 2012 where Dr Martin Barnes (again a keynote speaker) spoke about how he 'conjured up' the iron triangle for the IPMA World Congress keynote address in 1972 in Stockholm. He noted that in his original presentation he used the terms 'time, cost and quality', but later changed it to 'time, cost and performance', as performance was a better component for capturing the desired outcomes of a project. These desired outcomes could often exceed the specifications implied in the term 'quality'.

One simple explanation is the increasing complexity of the corporate environment in which the project operates. A Gartner report presented at the Content and Collaboration Summit in 2010 noted that today's corporate environment would be exceedingly unfamiliar to a worker from the 1960s. Practices such as 'swarming teams', rapid simulation and experimentation, virtual offices, mobile working and cloud-based computing are all products of the last few decades (Austin 2010).

My own experience mirrors the above. Even in the early 1990s there was still a reasonable degree of rigidity and linearity in the corporate structures. In one of my first project management roles, working for a major bank, my colleagues and I took great delight in counting the number of positions that stood between us, at the very bottom of the ladder, and the CEO at the very top. For myself, there were 15. Compare this with my current role in 2013 and there are only five (and as a project manager, even a relatively senior one, I still remain close to the bottom of the ladder). Corporate structures have now become exceedingly flat and, along with that flatness has come the inevitable cross-departmental lines of authority that are known as 'matrix reporting'. In the early 1990s I was generally responsible to one person and the projects I ran tended to be bounded by the department in which I worked. Even when they crossed departmental lines, a project generally had a single owner with authority over nearly all aspects of budget, schedule and specification.

Whilst cumbersome, I found the relatively rigid and linear operating models of the early 1990s generally proved effective, provided the requirements and the environment in which the project operated remained relatively static (Thomsett 2002). Contrast this with one of my latest projects, in which there was no formal owner assigned (because the stakeholders could not agree on where that ownership should reside) and the budget itself was split between 30 different cost centres, forcing me to negotiate with numerous department heads for every change, no matter how small. Such matrix style organisations are now the norm, and this, along with general conditions of high uncertainty, the increasing complexity of systems, and the continual reduction in 'time to

market' requirements (Pich, Loch and Meyer 2002), have made project management comparable to "balancing the juggler on the egg" (as one of my colleagues memorably put it.)

At a personal level, after nearly 20 years as a freelance contractor in the IT industry, moving from one project and company to the next, I was growing increasingly disaffected with the practice in which I was engaged. No amount of effort or technical skill appeared to make a difference to the outcome. No matter the exhaustive number of requirements that were gathered, the volumes of project 'artefacts' that were produced or the size and complexity of the ever-expanding schedules that were created, few if any projects could be brought in against their original parameters.

This does not mean all my projects were considered unsuccessful. Despite the overruns, and the additional budget and the reductions in scope, many stakeholders were satisfied with the project as it was delivered. Which only served to make it worse. It was as if I was a doctor and, despite losing the patient, the family were relatively happy with my effort! As I revealed in the preface to this dissertation, such was the level of my dissatisfaction that, in 2005 and after a particularly bad experience running a project for a large government department (a project that ended with me retrenching eight of my colleagues in the course of a single day – the single worst day of my working life), I contemplated turning my back on project management all together.

The formal project management discipline, which I had studied through project management manuals such as the *Project Management Body of Knowledge* [PMBok]⁴ and Prince-2⁵, had revealed their weaknesses to me and left me with me no predictive powers to speak of. I was experiencing a profound disruption to my practice as a project manager, one that no amount of formal training or certification appeared able to resolve. I no longer had an authentic relationship to my work.

⁴ The Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge [PMBok] is published by the Project Management Institute. It released the 5th Edition of the standard in 2013.

⁵ Projects in Controlled Environments [Prince-2] is a non-proprietary project management standard developed by the UK Government.

2.3 A Crisis of Practice

This dissertation is therefore written against a background of both a project management practitioner and a practice in crisis. As Macintyre (1984) has noted, when there is a clear and expanding distinction between what the practice claims to be able to do and what it actually achieves, then the practice can reasonably be said to be in crisis:

The expert's claim to status and reward is fatally undermined when we recognise that he possesses no sound stock of law-like generalisations and when we realise how weak the predictive powers available to him are. (MacIntyre 1984:106)

What then, as 'experts', are project management practitioners trying to predict? The 'iron triangle' of time, cost and performance serves to define the parameters by which existing project management practice measures itself. These parameters are defined in the very early stages of the project lifecycle and constitute a 'prediction' against which the project and project manager are ultimately measured. If we accept the project management practitioner's claim of predictive capacity in terms of this 'iron triangle', then their expertise is fatally undermined by the high rate of failure in achieving those predictions (Lewis 1999, Kerzner 2001, Hartley 2009).

An analogy to this situation would be a medical practice such as surgery where, despite the existence of a uniform and consistently applied method, the majority of patients died after surgery⁶. Eventually, a point of crisis is reached where the inherent inadequacy of the practice can no longer be ignored. As Koskela and Howell (2008) observe "it is no exaggeration to claim that project management as a discipline is in crisis, and that a paradigm change, long overdue, has to be realised" (p.297).

⁶ Indeed, towards the end of the 19th century this was the case and the impact upon surgical practice and medicine in general at the time was profound; see Ellis (2002) *A History of Surgery*, Greenwich Medical Media, London, p.99–125

Thomas Kuhn (1996) observed that all paradigms are built upon earlier ones. Our understanding in the present does not emerge out of thin air, but is preconditioned by prior bodies of understanding that have evolved over significant periods of time. Understanding is therefore historically situated and it is only through an examination of the history of our present paradigms that contradictions within it can be revealed (Kuhn 1996:1-9).

However, current forms of enquiry into project management practice actually do so from an a-historical perspective that assumes the universality of the present paradigm. In this form of research, existing project management standards such as the PMBoK (PMI 2013) are conceived as independent of historical forces and therefore immune to the contingencies of prior paradigms (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b). The result has been to limit the effectiveness of such research in shedding light on the causes of project failure, or the development of alternative competencies to deal with it.

Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) argue there are two ways research can reinforce existing paradigms. The first way is 'presentism' whereby "the historian takes a model, a concept, an institution, a feeling, or a symbol from his present, and attempts – almost by definition unwittingly – to find that it had a parallel meaning in the past" (p.118). The second way is 'finalism', which "tries to find the foundations of the present in some distant times, and analyze history as a finalized process that necessarily leads from that point to the present" (Lenfle 2012:4-5).

In his impressive historical treatment of ancient projects, Y.C. Chiu (2011) examines significant construction projects undertaken throughout the ancient world over some 3,500 years. From the building of the Great Ziggurat of Ur (circa 2100BC) to the construction of the Pantheon (AD118–126), Chiu poses the hypothesis that "there are circumstances in different historical periods that affect the development of the areas of expertise and their application to project activities" (p.14). In exploring the construction of these significant works, Chui

achieves admirably the stated aim to “increase understanding and appreciation of the profession of project management and situate it historically” (p.11).

There are, however, limitations to this kind of enquiry. The presentism of Chui’s enquiry is explicit as it views history through a contemporary perspective and, in doing so, imposes the assumptions and premises of the existing project management paradigm onto earlier ones. As Chui (2011) puts it, “all concepts or analytical categories applied to history arise out of a contemporary standpoint. While the historical data must stand for themselves, the ideas used to organize them can appropriately come from present modes of understanding project management” (p.9).

In the examination of the construction of the Roman Colosseum between 75AD and 82AD, Chui argues “the Romans *must have* utilized disciplined and scientific project management to achieve their building aims” (p.3) [my italics]. Chui concludes from this and other similarly impressive projects in the ancient world that “ancient civilizations practised the ‘science’ of project management” and that whilst “project management did not yet claim a technical definition during those ancient projects, the ancient builders understood and carried out the principles of project management in practice” (p.3).

Chui (2011) maintains “much of contemporary project management theory and practice lacks a historically conscious foundation, an awareness of how project management has developed throughout history” (p.4). To this end Chui’s work serves admirably to heighten the historical awareness of project management. Nonetheless, there is still the issue of the perspective through which the enquiry is conducted. As a normative historical enquiry it serves to explain past events by situating them in a contemporary paradigm of understanding, which in this case are modern project management techniques predicated on the scientific paradigm. In this sense Chui’s research is explanatory rather than critical.

Kozak-Holland’s (2011) equally impressive work provides an example of ‘finalism’ in historical enquiry. Kozak-Holland argues that “a close analysis of

these [ancient] projects highlights that supposedly recent management disciplines, only fully defined in 1983 as the PMBOK knowledge areas (integration, scope, time, cost, quality, human resource, communications, risk and procurement) were actively used in all these projects” (Kozack-Holland 2011:7).

The implication of Kozack-Holland’s (2011) point of view is that the current Project Management paradigm is not a function of its historical background, but represents instead the discovery of a universal method for doing any kind of work. The previous history of project management is treated as a progressive uncovering of an already existing truth, the culmination of which is the articulation of that truth in the PMBoK. As Whitty and Shulz (2007) remark, “some regard it [project management] as common-sense thinking and the natural outcome of logical reasoning and how work should be done” (p.15).

Chui and Kozack-Holland’s research is powerful in that it informs current project management practices via the richness of past project experiences. However, it remains wedded to the existing project management paradigm. By projecting existing Project Management practices back onto past projects, it seeks to explain those projects in terms of present understanding or, alternatively, it seeks to consolidate the present paradigm by elaborating past practices as a steady, logical progression towards the present, fully realised practice. In either case, the existing project management paradigm remains unchallenged.

Whilst Chui and Kozack-Holland make the explanatory nature of their analysis explicit, it is clearly limited to a discussion of project management in the context of existing practice. To that end, their work is invaluable in providing project managers a perspective on their current practices through reflection on earlier projects. The objective of research through such a perspective is normative in the sense that it “asserts that project management deserves and requires relevant historical exploration to fill the gaps in our knowledge,” and the aim is not to challenge the current paradigm, encapsulated in the existing bodies of knowledge, but to further consolidate it by “grounding it

retrospectively in a trajectory that begins in ancient civilizations” (Kozak-Holland 2011:4).

The purpose of this section was not to dismiss the validity of traditional historical enquiry. Chui and Kozack-Holland’s work stands as exemplars of their type that serve an important purpose within the context of normal project management practice. The limitation of this kind of approach, however, is that the enquiry is conducted through the prism of the contemporary project management paradigm. As such the research assumes a privileged position in the examination that is superior to, and therefore independent of, the broader project management narrative. Such an approach serves to consolidate the existing, dominant project management paradigm by retrospectively applying it to projects throughout history. Accordingly, previous ways of managing projects are seen only as either more or less sophisticated examples of current project management practice (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b).

2.4 Stars in the Wrong Place

If we accept the argument that project management, as currently theorised and practised, is in a state of crisis, what alternative ways of thinking about practice are available to us? If we are to escape the confines of the normative research approaches outlined above, then the first challenge is to accept the possibility of other paradigms of practice.

Kuhn argues that when the anomalies within a practice increase, their impact upon the stated aims of the practice can become so significant that they can no longer be accommodated within the confines of normal practice (pp.23–35). To highlight his point, Kuhn used the example of astronomy. By the late 19th century, astronomers were regularly observing stars and planets in the ‘wrong place’, at least according to where Newtonian theory said they should be. In the normal practice of astronomy, such an anomaly was treated as a misapplication of technique. Celestial bodies simply do not appear in the wrong place. They

move according to Newtonian laws that yield extraordinarily accurate predictions. In this event, 'poor astronomical observation technique' might be the characterisation of the cause of the anomaly. And if exactly the same observation by other astronomers did not yield the same anomaly, the assumption of poor technique would be a reasonable conclusion.

What if, however, a large number of other astronomers begin to observe the same anomaly? Stars are not appearing exactly where they should, and planets are not behaving exactly as predicted.⁷ What then? Kuhn points out to assume poor technique from all of them is irrational (1996:81-83). When following a technique predicated upon a paradigm's fundamental principles consistently fails to yield a result the paradigm predicts, the paradigm is not internally consistent. Nor can such a problem be resolved by the normal techniques of the paradigm, as those techniques depend on the coherence of the paradigm for their efficacy. The paradigm itself is now called into question. Such questioning requires a different kind of enquiry into the paradigm on which the practice is based in order to elaborate new principles (Kuhn 1996:73-76).

Kuhn argues that clear evidence of a practice in crisis was a proliferation of theories attempting to resolve the anomalies being experienced, yet at the same time remaining within the context of existing practice (p.77-80). A number of alternative theories have emerged in project management practice over the last 20 years that seek to resolve the anomaly of persistent project failure, particularly within the IT sector. Various project management methods such as Rapid, Agile, Extreme and Radical (Thomsett 2002, Wysocki 2009), have been promoted as alternative theories better able to deal with the contemporary IT environment. These alternatives have achieved a degree of success in parts of the sector (predominantly software development) (Thomsett 2002, DeCarlo 2004, Morris 2008, Perrin 2008, Wysocki 2009).

⁷ Further information regarding this phenomena and its impact on scientific practice can be found in Gribben (2002) *Science: A History*, Penguin Books, London, pp.589-595

As Kuhn (1996) observes, though, when new methods are generated within the space of a practice to deal with a crisis in the paradigm, they are invariably tightly constrained and therefore work only under highly specific circumstances (pp.77–80). The project management method called Agile, for example, addresses a specific issue, pointed out as problematic in the successful delivery of software projects by a number of authors, namely 'unclear requirements' (Wysocki 2009, Highsmith 2010). Agile deals with unclear requirements by advocating a cyclical project approach, in which an immediate set of limited requirements is identified and the software development done to deliver it within a 6–8 week timeframe. The cycle is then repeated with the next identified set of requirements (Highsmith 2010). This method has proved very effective in dealing with the specific cause of unclear requirements by focusing on them one limited set at a time. This also has a flow-on effect into other causes of project failure, such as poor estimating and scope creep. By radically reducing the effective scope of the work, the parameters of time, cost and specification are far easier to control (Wysocki 2009).

Whilst Agile can be very effective in smaller, decentralised software projects where it is possible to deal with specific business requirements one at a time, this is not the case with large IT infrastructure projects. In these projects requirements need to be considered holistically for an overall solution to be devised. There are also problems with being unable to compare competing bids in a competitive tendering process, and insufficient recourse to legal remedy in the event that anything goes wrong. In such project environments Agile remains problematic at best and has not been proven to be any more successful than more traditional methods (Ballard 2011).

Whilst the proliferation of alternative methods, like Agile, within a practice may serve to extend the life of the paradigm on which the practice is based, they do not resolve the internal contradictions (Kuhn 1996). The repeated failure of projects to deliver on the terms of their own success is equivalent to astronomers repeatedly finding stars in the wrong place. They represent anomalies that researchers and practitioners should not ignore. When the

causes of project failure highlighted above are treated as symptoms of internal contradiction within the paradigm instead of deviations from good practice, an opportunity for a different critique offers itself. As Kuhn observes, “crises are a necessary pre-condition for the emergence of novel theories” (1996:77). By revealing the internal contradictions, opportunities for revision to the paradigm that had previously gone unobserved may present themselves.

2.5 Disruption as the Basis of Existential Hermeneutic Research

It was against this background of a practice in crisis that I began my PhD. At first it had been as an escape from what was the increasing frustration of my work as a project manager. I had become interested in continental philosophy in general and existential hermeneutics in particular whilst doing research for my MBA, and when the opportunity presented itself to continue in this vein with a doctoral thesis I leapt at it. Whilst it was an endlessly fascinating area of enquiry, I did not at first see the opportunity it afforded for insight into my own practice. I felt project management was a far too practical activity to take advantage of what appeared, at first glance at least, to be the deeply theoretical and intensely abstract philosophical school of existential hermeneutics. It was to the credit of my supervisor that I was eventually able to see how wrong I was about both project management and existential hermeneutics. Project management as a deeply human activity is imbued with far more meaning than I ever gave it credit for, and it was the situated, contextual and surprisingly practical field of existential hermeneutics that ultimately allowed me to see that.

It was not until well into my first year of part-time study that I began to see the possibilities of informing my practice with research in an existential hermeneutic mode. Where to begin though? Unlike a quantitative study being undertaken by many of my fellow researchers, I did not have a specific question that would provide the focus of my research. For example, a colleague of mine was conducting research into the relationship between the success of a project

based on its originally defined parameters of time, cost and specification, and the perceived stakeholder value of the same project. This kind of question allowed for the possibility of measurement, of comparing one set of data with another and generating some specific conclusions.

By contrast, all I appeared to have was a singular and intense dissatisfaction with my practice. There was no specific question I wanted answered. Instead, my entire working life was itself 'in question' as the everyday activities I conducted (and was still conducting whilst I researched my dissertation) no longer carried the meaning they once had. In fact, I had become so deeply suspicious of the tools of my trade that I viewed them as a carpenter might view a saw that he suspects is not cutting straight, or a hammer where the head keeps slipping off. The pivotal moment of my research came with the understanding, gained from the work of Martin Heidegger (1993), that such disruptions to my everyday practice were not an impediment to existential hermeneutic research, but were actually the basis of it.

In the early part of my career I was in a state of everyday familiarity with my practice. The projects I was engaged to run by my clients were relatively small and not overly complex. This did not mean they were easy. By and large they were very demanding in the amount of effort required to make them successful. But the path to that success was clear. Early on I completed the necessary certifications offered by the Project Management Institute and found them to relate well to the problems of my practice. I found if you followed their reasonably consistent method and kept everyone else to it as well, the tools did their job and achieved the intended outcomes. As a result I had no need to question the practice in which I was engaged.

Over time, things began to change. As I became more proficient at my work I was given increasingly more demanding projects to run. This is an entirely normal state of affairs in any practice. What did not occur was a corresponding increase in the level of knowledge that came with that increased responsibility. Beyond the pages of the project management manuals, there seemed little else

to guide my activity. As they were laid out, the guides to project management knowledge claimed to “apply to any project, regardless of size, scope or complexity” (PMI 2013). It was like joining a secret society, only to have every secret revealed on day one, and those secrets uninspiring at best. Far from gaining mastery of my tools, I found the tools became less and less relevant to the problems with which I was increasingly confronted.

Rather than focus on specific problems *within* the practice, an existential hermeneutic treats the disruption itself as a legitimate area of concern. Disruption implies something other than a simple problem to be resolved. A problem is a piece of wood jamming a door and preventing it from opening. Forcing out the piece of wood or using another door are the possible solutions to this problem. Disruption is not like this. Disruption is when the relationship we have with our everyday activities no longer makes sense. Disruption tests something far more significant than our intellect or our skills; it tests our way of being in the world (Heidegger 1993). This was the manner in which my practice had been disrupted. It was not a problem demanding a solution in the traditional sense, but a problem with my ‘way of being’ a project manager.

2.6 Chapter Summary

So dominant is the formal project management method (as defined by such standards as the PMBoK) in the execution of projects that project managers remain largely unaware of the alternative methods that could be utilised (Bresnen 2006). Despite repeated failures, project managers continue to utilise tools and techniques derived from principles whose philosophical justifications remain relatively unchallenged (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006c). As such, the existing formal project management method is now accepted as ‘the’ way in which projects are delivered rather than as simply one method amongst the many required to successfully deliver a project (Ackroyd 1994). The effect has been to limit the possibilities for project managers striving to deliver projects for the organisations they serve.

Kuhn's (1996) critique of practice offers a way forward for project management. As Kuhn points out, it was in the space of disruption to the practice of physics that Albert Einstein was able to account for the anomaly of celestial bodies in the wrong place. Rather than accept the fundamental premises of the existing Newtonian paradigm, Einstein challenged concepts such as the 'fixed' nature of time and space itself⁸. Einstein's critique ultimately led to a revised paradigm of physics that incorporated both the existing Newtonian laws and an extension to those laws that accounted for the observed anomalies (Kuhn 1996:98-99).

This chapter has argued a similar revision is required for the paradigm on which the practice of project management is based. The observed anomalies of project failure have reached the point where they are too pervasive to be ignored. No longer can such failures be understood within a simplistic cause and effect model that assumes the current standard of practice. Practitioners and researchers alike need to face the challenge of project failure by exploring alternative approaches that resolve the present contradictions.

⁸ Further information regarding the challenge to the model of classical physics in the early 20th century can be found in Einstein (1961) Relativity: The Special and the General Theory, Three Rivers Press, New York

Chapter 3 – A Genealogy of Project Management

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter argued that project management as a practice is in a crisis as a result of the high level of project failure. It proposed that existing research into project management is limited by general acceptance of the existing paradigm of practice, and that an alternative approach to project management practice is required if project management is to remain relevant in the future.

This chapter conducts a genealogical enquiry into the practice of project management. This enquiry is driven by the argument that the continual failure of projects to meet their own standard of success (i.e. time, cost and performance) is a symptom of internal contradictions within the practice of project management itself. The enquiry proceeds by answering a number of inter-related questions. First, how and why did the existing paradigm of project management practice emerge and what political, social and cultural factors led to its adoption by the project management community? Second, why does a paradigm that appears so unsuitable in achieving its stated purpose persist? And, finally, what has been the impact of the existing paradigm on concepts of success and failure in project management practice?

These questions are answered by arguing that the source of project management's present internal contradictions are contained within its own historical narrative. This chapter demonstrates how the 'modern' features of project management practice are directly linked to, and largely unchanged from, principles of scientific management developed for the heavy manufacturing industry in the early 20th century. It further shows how these hidden aspects of the project management paradigm have led to contradictions in the practice of project management that have directly contributed to the high rates of project failure in the contemporary corporate environment.

The chapter proceeds by first outlining a genealogical approach to historical enquiry, utilising Nietzsche's form of genealogy in his enquiry into Western morality. Having elaborated the elements of a genealogy, the next section examines the emergence of project management as a profession, and in doing so contextualises project management practice as a contingent, critical and historical narrative. Finally, it traces forward the themes uncovered to highlight the present contradictions of project management, contradictions that are encapsulated in the notion of control and its relationship to concepts of success and failure.

3.2 Outline of a Genealogy

This section argues for a different form of enquiry into project management practice, one that "does not involve the adoption of a privileged position with respect to the object of critique" (Guay 2011). Rather than taking the contemporary paradigm as a given, in either the form of Presentism or Finalism as outlined in the previous chapter, a genealogy operates from within an existing paradigm, initially accepting its fundamental premises before tracing forward the various threads of its narrative to reveal previously hidden contradictions (Guay 2011).

This section asks three questions. First, what are the principal assumptions and premises underpinning a genealogy? Second, what are the distinctive features of these assumptions and premises that make a genealogy applicable as an enquiry into Project Management practice and, third, how does it avoid the pitfalls of Presentism and Finalism inherent in traditional enquiry?

The genealogical approach of this chapter is derived from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and described, predominantly, in his *Genealogy of Morality* (1969). In this work Nietzsche conducts a genealogy of the moral paradigm of Western civilisation. In doing so, Nietzsche makes explicit that morality was an inherited

tradition, able to be traced through a line of descent in the same way that we can trace our own biological ancestors (Guay 2011).

As a moral theorist, Nietzsche stood opposed to the dominant approach to moral enquiry at the end of the 19th century. MacIntyre argues that philosophers like David Hume typified this dominant approach, by viewing morality as a strictly a-historical paradigm. Morality was, in Hume's view, something universal and transcendent that existed independently of any social, political or cultural context. Moral enquiry therefore involved explicating rules of behaviour that applied to all people at all times (MacIntyre 1984).

Nietzsche fundamentally disagreed with this view, and argued the present moral paradigm could be understood only with reference to the past. Unlike traditional historical enquiry, Nietzsche's genealogy constituted an immanent critique of the late 19th century moral paradigm (Guay 2011). Immanent critique, as a critique 'from within', assumes that practices do not refer outside themselves for the justification of their paradigm. All the principles of a paradigm are justified internally. It is when the principles of the paradigm come into conflict with one another in the course of its utilisation in human practices that contradictions can begin to emerge. Whilst a practice can often adjust its principles to accommodate and resolve the contradiction, sometimes the contradiction is so fundamental and persistent that the entire practice can break down (Harvey 1990).

The concept of the immanent critique has its grounding in the historical criticism of Georg Hegel and Karl Marx. The essential purpose of an immanent critique in their view was to expose the historical basis of the paradigm being critiqued. A paradigm was, first and foremost, a product of its history and was ultimately constituted by social, cultural, ideological and political concepts. Hegel and Marx observed that for the most part these concepts remained unacknowledged. Only through an exploration of the elements of a paradigm's history could the internal contradictions within it be exposed (Buchwalter 1991).

By demonstrating the manner in which morality evolved in Western civilisation over the course of several thousand years, Nietzsche draws out the contradictions that have become embedded in our moral paradigm as a result. As Nietzsche saw it, the fundamental questions of his moral genealogy were these:

Under what conditions did man invent those value judgments good and evil? *And what value do they themselves have?* Have they inhibited or furthered human flourishing up until now? Are they a sign of distress, or impoverishment, or the degeneration of life? Or, conversely, do they betray the fullness, the power, the will of life, its courage, its confidence, and its future? (1969:2)

In order to answer these questions, Nietzsche argued further:

We need a critique of moral values, for once the value of these values must itself be called into question – and for this we need a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they have grown, under which they have developed and shifted. (1969:5)

The principal feature of Western morality that Nietzsche identifies in his critique is that of guilt. Guilt, Nietzsche maintained, is the end result of a will unable to reconcile itself to its promises. The contradiction Nietzsche exposes in Western morality is therefore this: If we abandon the idea of our own will in relation to promises kept, what are we left with? The promise remains as a statement of obedience, but to what? For Nietzsche, when outward obedience to our own will is abandoned (or turned inward, as in Christian 'slave' morality) our power loses its expression; we are unable to manifest our obedience to our own will and guilt ensues (Bernstein 1987).

The principal assumptions that stand behind Nietzsche's genealogy are the linguistic, socially-constructed and therefore self-referential nature of the paradigms that constitute the object of enquiry (Guay 2011). This is a direct challenge to the notion that a practice can claim to justify itself externally.

Religious practices, for example, clearly claim that the fundamental principles on which their practice is based are transcendental; that is, the source of the paradigm's veracity is external to the paradigm itself, in the form of an omniscient God. Science can also be considered to base many of its principles on axioms that are not contained within it but are somehow beyond it; that is, the idea of science as the expression of unequivocal natural 'laws' (Chalmers 1976).

Whatever the merits of such claims, Rorty (1979) argues that all human practices are inevitably expressions of language. Whatever claims practices may make of a transcendent basis for their knowledge, the paradigm that supports the practice is communicated in a language that needs to be free of significant contradiction for the language of the practice to remain coherent (Rorty 1979). Exposing such contradictions is the point of a genealogy.

The purpose of the immanent critique of a genealogy also differs from traditional modes of enquiry in that it is emancipatory rather than explanatory. As Marx observes, "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (quoted in Guay 2011). Emancipatory does not mean destructive, however. Nietzsche's intent in his immanent critique of Christianity was the reinvigoration of the moral life of man (Bernstein 1987). In a similar vein, Martin Luther's exposure of the contradictions at the heart of Catholicism had led to the Protestant reformation and new ways of relating to God (MacCulloch 2009), just as Einstein's exposure of the contradictions in Newtonian physics led to a new way of relating to the universe (White and Gribbin 1993).

Importantly in these examples, moral philosophy, religious observance or scientific practice were not destroyed in the process. Whilst the events precipitated by the likes of Nietzsche, Luther and Einstein were certainly tumultuous in the context of their practices, their efforts were aimed at resolving the contradictions they had observed for the betterment of the practices of which they were a part. They did not create the contradictions

themselves. An immanent critique is not revolutionary for revolution's sake. The purpose of the immanent critique is an improvement in the status quo. It is conducted for the betterment of the practices being enquired into by revealing the cultural, historical and social artefacts on which the practice has been built and revealing previously hidden aspects of its development that have served to inhibit it (Harvey 1990).

Having established the fundamental premises of a genealogy, this section now turns to the question of what features of a genealogy serve to distinguish it from traditional historical enquiry and allow it to expose the internal contradictions of current paradigms. According to Guay (2011), there are three main features of Nietzsche's genealogy that set it apart from a traditional historical enquiry: historical agency, historical hermeneutic and criticality.

Historical agency in genealogy recognises the ability of individuals and groups of individuals in the past to influence the course of present events. Historical agency asks of the narrative, "Who influenced the course of events, and do their actions alone explain the present understanding?" To this end a genealogy considers events of the past as actions, deliberately undertaken and therefore having *purpose* (Guay 2011:45) By contrast, traditional histories tend to both "reveal and conceal" (p.46) in detailing the contribution of particular individuals and groups (agents) in the development of historical movements. Traditional histories accomplish this by revealing or emphasising the involvement of selected agents, whilst concealing or de-emphasising the involvement of others. What remains is a distorted view of history that serves to mask contradictions inherent in the dominant narrative. By rethinking an existing paradigm as the current mode of interacting narrative streams, some dominant at certain times whilst others less so, a genealogical enquiry can serve to reveal the impact of previously unknown agents on the paradigm.

The historical hermeneutic component of a genealogy recognises the narrative that is the object of enquiry is constantly exposed to reinterpretation. The

question asked in the historical hermeneutic is, "What other narrative is the narrative dependent on and what other ways could it be told?" A genealogy therefore recognises the narrative is never 'fixed' but is constantly evolving and changing (Guay 2011). As Nietzsche (1969) observes, "only that which has no history is definable" (p.77) and it is only by denying a history to its paradigm of understanding that a practice is able to define itself as universal and transcendent. Such definition is illusory, however, and serves to conceal the myriad concepts that have been synthesised within a paradigm over the course of its long development. Far from being universal or transcendent modes of understanding, our existing paradigms are *contingent*, or dependent upon, previous modes of understanding for their present state (Schmidt 2006). A genealogy therefore serves to recognise the contingency of our narratives and give space to competing interpretations.

The final feature of a genealogy is that of criticality. The fundamental question asked in a critical enquiry is, "Who stands to gain?" from a particular narrative interpretation. A genealogy therefore seeks to expose the implicit *power* structures that underpin the formation of our narratives, and the effect that such power arrangements can have on the paradigms that inform our practices (Guay 2011). The purpose of the critical feature of a genealogy is to emancipate the inheritors of the existing narrative by revealing to them the power structures that underpin their paradigms (Marshall 2006).

3.3 A Genealogy of Project Management

As previously argued, the failure of most projects to deliver in the modern corporate context constitutes an anomaly in the project management paradigm that speaks to internal contradictions. Traditional historical enquiry into earlier projects offers little on this point as it is seeking to explain the past in terms of the present. Genealogy, however, looks to explain features of the present, such as the anomaly of project failure, by their "extension backward through time" (Guay 2011) The following section endeavours to understand the anomaly of

project failure by answering the questions: What historical movements gave rise to existing project management practices? And how does “a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they have grown” (Nietzsche 1969:5) help explain present contradictions?

As opposed to traditional enquiry, the genealogy will proceed backwards, beginning with the current understanding of the Project Management paradigm and then tracing forward the history of the development of its underlying principles.

What were the conditions that led to the emergence of Project Management as currently understood and practised? This section shows that the emergence of the contemporary Project Management paradigm from the 1950s onwards was the result of the convergence of two separate historical movements. The first was the professionalisation efforts of a relatively small group of engineers with specialist skills in the use of the Critical Path Method (CPM) and Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT). The second was the rise, during the same period, of the computer, a technology capable of enabling the CPM and PERT tools to be widely utilised. It was the combination of these two movements, rather than the actual applicability of the techniques to real-world projects, that led to their eventual dominance within the Project Management paradigm, via their constitution within the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBoK).

The Project Management Institute (PMI) published the first edition of the PMBoK in 1983. Koskella and Howell (2008) argue that, whilst there is “no explicit theory of project management”, one can be discerned in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBoK) and it is this theory that is generally applied in practice. Whilst there are other project management standards in existence, such as the UK Office of Government Commerce (UK OGC) Prince2 standard, and the International Project Management Association International Competence Baseline (ICB) (IPMA 2006), the PMBoK is generally considered to

be the de-facto guide to practice for the profession of project management (Lewis 2007) and has since released its 5th Edition (PMI 2013).

In defining project management standards, the PMBOK outlines nine discrete areas of project management knowledge:

1. Project Integration Management
2. Project Scope Management
3. Project Time Management
4. Project Cost Management
5. Project Quality Management
6. Project Human Resource Management
7. Project Communications Management
8. Project Risk Management
9. Project Procurement Management.

Each of these areas of knowledge is then broken into a smaller set of activities, the overall mastery of which defines project management competency. For example, Project Time Management consists of:

1. Define Activities
2. Sequence Activities
3. Estimate Activity Resources
4. Estimate Activity Durations
5. Develop Schedule
6. Control Schedule.

Each activity is then further broken down into the various inputs, outputs and tools necessary for the conduct of each activity. The only acknowledgement paid to social or organisational culture in the PMBOK is to recognise it as an “environmental factor” (p.27), one subject to the same type of procedural control as the other elements of the project.

The PMBoK sought to consolidate a range of informal tools and techniques developed around the 1950s in the United States. Among these tools was the Critical Path Method (CPM) developed by Kelley and Walker in 1958 for the E.I. du Pont de Numours firm for use in managing plant shutdowns. At the same time, the Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) was created by Booze-Allen and Hamilton to support the US Military Polaris Submarine Program (Weaver 2007). Weaver (2007) draws attention to a meeting on 7 May 1957 in Delaware, where the first project to utilise CPM received its official funding, and argues “given the central role CPM played in the start of our profession, this date seems the most appropriate start point” for the establishment of Project Management as a profession (p.4). Scheduling techniques became, Weaver argues, the basis of Project Management theory from this point.

How, though, did PERT expand beyond these single applications to achieve the ubiquity it enjoys today? As Sapolsky (1972) notes, during Polaris “the other services at first disparaged PERT, then copied it shamelessly. This caused a substantial PERT cottage industry of consultants and trainers during the 1960’s” (p.14). As a result there were a large number of practitioners, skilled in the specific techniques of PERT and CPM, with a vested interest in continuing to work. When these large programs ended, these people had a need to promote the techniques to ensure their continued relevance. Professionalisation was a means to achieving that (Sapolsky 1972).

It was the desire of the emerging field of technical schedulers to professionalise that led directly to the creation of project management forums and associations such as the Project Management Institute in 1969. As Weaver (2007) argues:

The evolution of modern project management is a direct consequence of the schedulers need for a forum to discuss and develop their new discipline. Certainly well over 50% of the people that founded INTERNET in Europe (the fore-runner of IPMA and the APM) and the PMI in America were schedulers. Recollections of early conferences and publications from these associations strongly suggest that in the 1960's their focus was almost exclusively on project controls and 'scheduling'. (p.4)

From there it was not long before the various tools and techniques of their newly established profession were captured in professional bodies of knowledge, of which the PMBOK remains the paradigm example (Morris, Crawford, Hodgson, Shepherd and Thomas 2006).

The implication of this is that the emergence of the current Project Management paradigm, as encapsulated in its professional body of knowledge the PMBoK, was not the result of a discovery of the natural laws for managing work (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b). It was instead the result of the purposive action of a relatively small group of individuals pursuing their professional goals. Bresnen (2006) notes that there has always been an issue incorporating the activities of project management into professional structures for the purposes of career advancement, with many organisations viewing it as extraneous to their core functions. The proliferation of scheduling techniques and, thus, schedulers during the late 20th century enabled a small, technically skilled movement to exert its influence on the existing discipline of managing projects, to the extent that the techniques of their expertise are now identified closely with the Project Management paradigm itself (Weaver 2007).

That the 'cottage industry' of PERT and CPM schedulers was able to transform itself into a profession was contingent on two other historical conditions. The first of these was the IT revolution, also gaining significant ground from the 1950s onwards (Haigh 2011). The IT revolution served to 'enable' the tools of CPM and PERT, making their use on project management activities possible,

though not, it is argued, necessarily desirable. Instead, scheduling techniques such as PERT became an example of the solution becoming part of the problem they were designed to resolve.

As previously discussed, the primary purpose of tools such as CPM and PERT is the management of time in order to ensure that deadlines are met. Both of these tools were an evolution of the bar charts developed by Henry Gantt around 1915 (Witzel 2012). Bar charts served to highlight the progress of project activities in pictorial form, but were limited in that they did not typically show the interdependencies of the activities. They also proved to be extremely difficult to implement in practical terms once they were established, as any change to any activity would require the entire chart to be redrafted. As such, despite an initial burst of popularity, the Gantt chart fell into disuse prior to the Second World War (Witzel 2012).

CPM and PERT sought to overcome the limitation of the Gantt chart by incorporating the concept of relationships (both sequential and parallel) between tasks within the diagrammatic representation of the bar chart (Moder and Phillips 1964). This allowed computations to be done to calculate the longest path of planned activities through the network of the project schedule (referred to as the 'critical path') and thus determine the end-date of the project (Lewis 2007). So ubiquitous have the pictorial representations of Gantt, CPM and PERT charts become, that their use is now almost synonymous with Project Management (DeCarlo 2004).

It was, however, the Information Technology revolution that enabled the rapid growth in scheduling technologies. Prior to the development of computers, the construction of detailed schedules was an extremely time-consuming task with limited benefits. With the development of the computer and scheduling software, their construction was manifestly easier. As a result there was an explosion in the use of scheduling techniques from the 1960s onwards (Weaver 2007). The sheer amount of data that could now be produced by the new

scheduling techniques in turn demanded more and more professional schedulers to analyse the output.

How successful, though, were techniques such as PERT in achieving project success? Traditional histories of Project Management suggest they were critical (Chiu 2011, Kozak-Holland 2011). Closer examination reveals other factors were more significant in the attribution of success, factors that were leveraged by the scheduling community to advance their professional goals.

As the previous discussion on the high-rate of project failure demonstrates, modern Project Management techniques are no guarantee of success. Indeed, one of the earliest and most famous examples of CPM and PERT techniques in operation was the Apollo moon project (Weaver 2007). Highlighted as a canonical example of Project Management in practice (Chaikan 1994, Kranz 2001), and in particular the application of CPM and PERT techniques (Kozak-Holland 2011), by the time of its completion in 1972 Apollo had, in fact, cost more than three times its original estimated budget (Lafleur 2010).

Closer examination into other large projects of the period reveals a similar discontinuity between the specific claims of the newly emerging Project Management paradigm and its delivery in practice. Like Apollo, the Polaris nuclear submarine project was, and continues to be, heralded as a significant success, and the scheduling techniques implemented within it as a significant factor in that success. Kozak-Holland (2011) states “the development of both CPM and PERT gave project managers much greater control over massively engineered and extremely complex projects. This was vital for the military weapons systems evolving and the space race which began in 1957, one of the most complex and difficult projects undertaken by humans” (p.39).

Deeper research into this issue reveals a different story. In research into the history of the Polaris project titled *The Polaris System Development: Bureaucratic and Programmatic Success in Government*, Sapolsky (1972) notes

that the "Special Projects Office [of Polaris] has gained an international reputation for the innovativeness and effectiveness of the management control system it has employed" (p.19). However, in reviewing the various methods brought to bear on the development activities over the course of the project, Sapolsky notes that the PERT technique was "distrusted" by the contractors working on the program and ultimately the only way they could be "coerced" into using it was to "publicise its widespread use and success" (1972:21).

The contractors' distrust was rooted in the fact that whilst PERT appeared to offer some capability in allowing activities to be brought in on time, it could not simultaneously deal with the associated costs or quality (Sapolsky 1972). On this point Naval Historian Norman Polmar sheds a revealing light in a footnote to an address to the US Naval History and Heritage Command in 1994 when he notes:

While initially additional funds were provided to the Navy for SLBM [Polaris] development, by 1959 the Navy was forced to cancel development of the Regulus II land-attack cruise missile and the P6M Seamaster flying-boat bomber, and delay construction of an aircraft carrier to help pay for the Polaris project. (Polmar 1994)

The implication of this observation is that PERT had far less impact on the success of Polaris than was generally publicised. Sapolsky (1972) comments that "PERT was less effective than advertised but more so than rain-dancing. As such, it served its purpose" (p.21). What was far more critical to the success of Polaris, he argues, was an effective organisational structure, competent leadership, esprit de corps, and general management techniques, all of which were underpinned by the need to build a massive deterrent against the potential for Soviet aggression (Sapolsky 1972).

What traditional histories of Project Management have therefore served to conceal is the political imperatives underpinning the apparent early successes of the scheduling techniques on which the Project Management paradigm is based. In the case of Polaris and Apollo, the United States was in a state of

heightened strategic tension with the Soviet Union, and the appearance of success in military and space exploration projects was a significant factor in their ongoing political exchanges. As Roberts (1996) notes, “there seemed to be something in space exploration which fed the patriotic imagination and rewarded patience with other aspects of daily life” (p.238). What is evident is that both the Apollo and Polaris projects failed in terms of the Project Management paradigm itself, that is, timelines were maintained at the expense of significant cost overruns (that both projects were still considered ‘successful’ is a theme that is returned to later in this chapter.)

This returns us to the original questions posed in this chapter: What were the conditions that led to the emergence of Project Management as currently understood and practised? As has been made clear, CPM and PERT techniques did not gain their dominance and influence within the Project Management paradigm due to their proven success in dealing with the problems to which they were applied. Rather, they gained dominance due to a number of historical conditions:

1. The professionalisation activities of a large group of technical schedulers following the completion of major military programs in the 1960s and 1970s
2. An IT revolution that enabled technical scheduling software to be used in practice
3. A cold war environment that promoted the ‘success’ of the projects in which scheduling techniques were used for political purposes.

The confluence of these events ensured the dominance of scheduling in the foundational period of professional project management. As a result, scheduling techniques such as PERT and CPM have become synonymous with the practice of project management itself (Thomas 2006).

The previous section revealed the manner in which the scheduling techniques of PERT and CPM achieved dominance in the management of projects due to the professional activities of small group of people around a specific set of tools, the proliferation of the technology necessary to implement them, and a political environment that promoted them (Howell, Macomber, Koskela and Draper 2004, Koskela and Howell 2008). Were these conditions sufficient, however, to entrench these tools so firmly as the basis of Project Management practice? This section argues that, whilst the initial emergence of the existing Project Management paradigm can be explained by these conditions, it was the conformance of the PMBoK to a much older narrative that accounts for its persistence.

The following section explores the foundations of that older paradigm, arguing for the clear links of existing Project Management practice to early 20th century forms of managerial theory based in the natural sciences. Known as 'scientific management' this encompassed the point of view that that all manner of problems, no matter their domain, could be resolved by reason and the scientific method alone (Sorrel 1991). The discussion shows that contemporary Project Management practices, far from being a modern, sophisticated theoretical framework capable of dealing with "complex and difficult projects" (Kozak-Holland 2011), is actually predicated on a highly systemic, rational and positivistic set of theories initially developed to improve early production manufacturing processes and grounded in Scientific Management.

Koskela and Howell (2008) argue that Project Management theory, as described in the PMBOK, is fundamentally a theory of *transformation*. The transformative notion of the project implies that its primary function is the transformation of inputs into outputs. In this view, a project is essentially a special kind of production process. According to Koskela and Howell (2008), this view has served as the basis of the Project Management paradigm since its inception: "mostly, the transformation view has been implicit – so embedded in thinking and practice that it has framed the basis of an invisible and unspoken paradigm that shapes behavior" (p.297).

The view of project management as being grounded in early 20th century production theory directly challenges the contemporary view of project management as being 'born' out of necessity in the 1950s era of highly complex projects. It was only the 'profession' of project management that emerged in the 1950s, not the paradigm of project management itself (Weaver 2007). The project management paradigm is instead shown to be contingent or, in other words, not a logical necessity for managing work but rather as something dependent on something else for what it is (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b).

The relevance of Koskela and Howell's (2008) research is the questions it poses: How and why did project management adopt a transformative theory of the project as the basis of its paradigm? In following the transformative production paradigm and its fundamental principles of objectivity, reduction and control, project management was staying firmly committed to a scientific tradition of management that was initiated by Henri Fayol, and then later developed by Frederick Taylor and Henry Gantt in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Koskela 2000).

In *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1967), Frederick Taylor outlined a theory of management predicated on principles of science. The essence of Taylor's approach can be summarised in his statement "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first" (p.7). The specific study Taylor used to develop his theory was the loading of pig-iron into railway carriages using manual labour. Taylor broke down the efforts of the individual labourers by tracking the time it took each of them to load a specific amount of pig-iron. He then began adjusting the pay of each labourer based on the amount of pig-iron loaded. The clear intention in doing so, stated specifically by Taylor, was to eliminate the problem of what was commonly described as "soldiering", or the propensity of labourers to work at far less than their maximum effort (Taylor 1967:3-8).

The purpose of this "soldiering", Taylor claimed, was twofold: the first was the "natural tendency" of the worker to "take it easy" and work at less than their

full capacity (1967:5–6). The second and more odious reason according to Taylor was the desire by the organised labour movement to ensure that an increase in productivity did not lead to a reduction in the workforce. Taylor argued this reasoning was fallacious and the history of the development of the various trades demonstrated this. Significant criticism has been made of Taylor on this point, principally by outlining that the reasoning of the organised labour movements was not fallacious and there was in fact large-scale dislocation of workers, particularly of the manual labourer variety, in the late 19th century period of heavy industrialisation (Witzel 2012).

Scientific management therefore evolved with a significant set of ideological and class underpinnings. As Witzel (2012) observes, “the concept of scientific management did not originate in a vacuum. It evolved as a specific response to problems facing industry” (p.82). The underlying cultural and political issue behind the generation of Taylor’s “scientific principles” was the “problem of labor” or, essentially, that human labour was inherently “lazy” and therefore inefficient and unpredictable. This was, to an engineer such as Taylor, unacceptable, and it was to the resolution of this task that Taylor set himself.

The basis of Taylor’s effort to resolve the ‘labour problem’ was fourfold:

1. The scientific design of tasks,
2. The scientific selection of workers
3. Training workers in a scientific manner
4. Willing cooperation between workers and management (Witzel 2012:85-86).

Witzel (2012) notes that Taylor stressed the last point continually in his writings, and it is therefore necessary to draw a distinction between criticism of scientific management generally and Taylor’s original genuine intent to improve both employers’ and employees’ standard of living. As economist Robert Hoxie in 1915 argued, “scientific management rests on the fundamental economic principle that harmony exists between employers and workers” (quoted in Witzel 2012:82). This principle of harmony rested, however, on the rationalist

premises of the scientific management paradigm, and the assumption there was “one best way” for doing work (Witzel 2012).

The Gantt chart is the most visible remnant of scientific management, and explains why harmony between worker and manager was difficult to maintain. In 1915 Henry Gantt, who had previously worked with Taylor, refined some of Taylor’s relatively simple time-management methods by producing what was to become known as the Gantt chart (Witzel 2012). The Gantt chart essentially provided in the form of a horizontal series of bars, a visual representation of scheduled activities, linked to one another as predecessor and successor tasks that showed their estimated duration and therefore the overall duration of the combined activities (Lewis 2007).

There are significant limitations to the Gantt chart. As a simple representation of the project activities it contains very little information about the project itself (Wysocki 2009). Specifically, it deals only with a single aspect of the ‘triple constraint’ of the project in that it deals with time, but not cost or quality. Nor is it capable of representing, in any way, the scope of the project. There is no function in a Gantt chart to understand the order of magnitude of any specific task (Wysocki 2009).

The development of CPM and PERT in the 1950s were specific attempts to resolve the limitations of the Gantt chart by introducing an additional level of sophistication. Rather than simple start-to-finish relationships between tasks, CPM and PERT now introduced probabilities into the visual representations. This meant that multiple paths through the project ‘network’ could now be analysed to determine the one ‘most critical’. In this modified form, the Gantt chart continues to be used extensively today as a fundamental tool of project management, Microsoft Project being the most ubiquitous example (DeCarlo 2004).

These innovations did nothing, however, to resolve the fundamental underlying issues behind the Gantt chart. As Robert Wysocki (2009) notes, "it reflects only the order imposed by the manager and, in fact, hides much of that information" (p.97). Ultimately, Wysocki argues, "the Gantt chart reflects only when the manager would like to have that work done" (p.97). The problem with the Gantt chart and its successors encapsulates the same general philosophical problem underpinning scientific management. The Gantt chart is a rational order imposed on the work by the manager. In its graphical representation the Gantt chart represents "the one best way" for that particular inter-related set of activities to be carried out, effectively eliminating the possibility of alternatives (Witzel 2012). Even the addition of probabilistic techniques in CPM and PERT did not provide for alternative ways of doing the established work; they simply provided for alternative timeframes and thus potential different orders of their execution (Turner 1999).

As described by Witzel (2012), management's belief in the imposition of a rational order on the activities of the workers beneath them constituted the flaw in the scientific model of management. Rationalism on the part of worker and manager was the critical assumption of Fayol, Taylor, Gantt and the remainder of the scientific school of early managerial thinking, yet it was constantly established that cultural, historical and political forces played a significant part in the behaviour of both managers and the managed (Witzel 2012).

Following the Second World War the 'science of management' rebadged itself as 'management science', an innocuous change that nonetheless established management as a discipline worthy of its own formal study. This in turn led to a rapid expansion in the theoretical framework of general management (Witzel 2012). Whilst most of this theory remained dedicated to concepts of management based in scientific principles, there were exceptions. Witzel notes "the tension between mechanistic and organic, human-centered models of management persisted after the Second World War with the parallel

developments of management science and other approaches based on open systems and contingency theory" (2012:7).

Bertalanffy's 'open systems theory', for example, challenged the objective, reductionist model of the organisation for a view of the organisation as "dynamic rather than static" and as "constantly changing both internally and externally in response to new stimuli" (Witzel 2012:189). First expounded in 1968, Bertalanffy's theory rejected "closed systems" types of management theories on the grounds that "they persisted in studying them [organizations] as if they were frozen in time." (Witzel 2012:189). Leveraging off the anti-rationality of open systems theory, contingency theory took this view even further, arguing there was no "one best way" and the only way to manage is the way "that is right for the place, time and people involved" (Witzel 2012:190).

Despite the existence of alternative theories such as open systems and contingency promulgating in the area of general management research during the same period that Project Management as a profession was being formed, Project Management remained wedded to the scientific paradigm and the 'one best way' of managing projects. This has in turn accounted for the proliferation of tools such as CPM and PERT with project management practice, offering as they do the apparent ability to achieve some of the objective and reductionist aims of the scientific management enterprise.

3.4 The Contradictions of Project Management

Having elaborated the historical conditions on which the present paradigm of Project Management practice is based, this chapter now traces forward those conditions in order to articulate the contradictions that have emerged in project management practice as a result. Three significant contradictions are uncovered. The first is the poor fit of the existing paradigm of Project Management to the environment in which it finds itself operating. Whilst

scientific management principles may have enjoyed success during the era of heavy manufacturing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Kozak-Holland 2011), their application in increasingly unstable and rapidly changing business environments is becoming problematic (Kodama 2007), as attested to by the high and increasing rate of contemporary project failure (Group 2009).

The desire for stability in uncertain times leads to the second contradictory notion of Project Management practice to be explored, which is the notion of control it has inherited from the natural sciences. Whereas the scientific method seeks to guarantee the control of the process in order to secure a verifiable result, Project Management seeks to secure control of the outcome. The misapplication of the natural scientific paradigm in the human domain, in an effort to retain control and avoid uncertainty, leads directly to the third contradictory notion of Project Management: success and failure. This is typified by situations where 'Project Management' has failed, yet the project itself has been declared successful, and vice versa. Ultimately, the Project Management paradigm is shown to be a highly contingent narrative, built upon the actions of previous actors, and heavily utilised as a political tool in the everyday activities of the corporation for the purpose of defining broader concepts of success and failure.

During the same period in which Project Management as a profession emerged, the corporate context within which projects operated changed considerably (Kodama 2007). That change has had a profound effect on the purposes for which projects are raised and the circumstances under which they are delivered. Despite this, little has been done to alter the existing Project Management paradigm, leaving it less and less able to deal with the contingencies of the modern corporate environment.

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman utilises the metaphor of "fluidity" to characterise the contemporary Western corporate environment in the late 20th century. Bauman contrasts "fluidity" with the previous era of "solidity", a period he roughly equates with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution through to

the mid-20th century, by noting “solid modernity was an era of mutual engagement. Fluid modernity is the epoch of disengagement, elusiveness, facile escape and hopeless chase” (p.120).

Supporting Bauman’s observation, Heerwagen (2010) observes that a typical worker in the 1960s would have experienced a high degree of direction from immediate superiors, been part of highly departmentalised and rigid structure and had a fairly high average period of tenure at a single organisation. By contrast, a typical worker in the late 1990s and early 2000s operates in an organisational context of reduced hierarchical structures, blurred boundaries between different departments and job categories, and a continual cycle of reorganisation interspersed with brief periods of stability (Heerwagen 2010).

The result of the increasing instability in the modern corporate environment has had, in Baumann’s view, a profound impact upon the attitudes of the people that make up the workforce in contemporary organisations. The employees of the modern corporation “know they are disposable, and so they see little point in developing attachment or commitment to their jobs, or entering lasting associations with their work-mates. To avoid imminent frustrations, they tend to be wary of any loyalty to the workplace or inscribing their own life purposes into its projected future” (Bauman 2000:152-153).

Similarly, a Gartner report presented at the Content and Collaboration Summit (2010) notes that today’s worker is increasingly exposed to a range of work practices that would have been relatively unfamiliar to a worker of the 1960s. This includes such practices as swarming teams that form around specific activities rather than permanent teams dedicated to specific processes, rapid simulation and experimentation rather than ‘deep’ analytic modelling for many work practices, and a virtual approach to the workplace that is seeing an anytime/anywhere pattern of work behaviour emerging (Austin 2010). Additionally, DeCarlo (2004) observes the interactions of skilled individuals in highly autonomous and rapidly changing groups, operating under very general

strategic direction in conditions of high uncertainty, is becoming the standard manner in which knowledge-based work is done.

Project management as a practice is typically seen as supporting the increasingly liquid corporate context described above. As an alternative to operational management, which tends to focus on clearly defined activities within discrete functional areas, project management is typically utilised whenever unique and cross-disciplinary work is required in the enterprise (Reich, Sauer and Wee 2006). Project management as a practice, therefore, would seem to demand an approach that matches the temporality and fluidity of the work environment in which it operates (Clegg, Pitsis, Marozzeky and Rura-Polley 2006). Instead, Project Management seeks to deal with the increasing level of uncertainty via the application of higher levels of control.

Previous sections have outlined the commitment of existing project management practices to a paradigm based in scientific management. This section demonstrates how this commitment to scientific principles provides what Kahneman (2011) refers to as an “illusion of control”. This illusion of control is predicated on the success of the naturalistic scientific paradigm that serves as the basis for existing project management practice.

Bent Flyvbjerg notes in *Making Social Science Matter* (2001) there is a “logical simplicity to the natural science paradigm, and... an undeniable basis as a means by which we have attempted to achieve mastery of nature, technology, and over our own conditions of life” (p.17). One of the key concepts in the scientific method is the control of a process, and it is this control that provides the mastery of life that we seek. The principal argument of this section is that, whilst this illusion of control has offered the *potential* for predictive power and thus success in corporate projects, it has not proved successful in practice.

Project management practice attempts to replicate the controlled experiment that is the foundation of the natural scientific method (Chalmers 1976). It

begins by assuming that, once a solution is established and agreed with senior management, it can be devolved into an increasingly smaller series of work packages. Typically this will proceed from a program of work down to a number of projects, then streams, activities, tasks, sub-tasks and work packages. (Hartley 2009) It assumes these discrete project elements can be measured, and the timing of their execution predicted with a high degree of accuracy (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas and Hodgson 2006). The 'reduction' of the project into small chunks therefore provides the opportunity to measure the allocated work in terms of time, cost, specification and scope, and is what allows for the execution of the project in an objective way (Cicmil 2006).

It is the assumption of reduction that stands behind the requirement for creating detailed specifications and schedules for defining individual units down to the lowest practical level. The principle of control assumes the detailed specifications and activity schedules established via the process of reduction are a literal representation of the project. By executing the specified activities as outlined in the various project artefacts (contracts, schedules, specifications etc.) the solution as originally envisioned will be created (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006c). Then, by managing deviations to the smallest individual units of the project, the overall project process will be under control (Turner 1999, Meredith and Samuel J. Mantel 2000, Kerzner 2001, Hartley 2003, Schwalbe 2007).

As a practice predicated on control, project management maintains a focus on the objective status of the project defined strictly in terms of the 'iron triangle' of time, cost and performance (Wysocki 2009). The implication of this focus, Nocker (2006) argues, is that "practitioners encounter the project as an objective reality 'out there' that can be managed through the use of specialist knowledge, prescriptive tools and standards of professional practice" (p.132). The coherence of project management as a practice is therefore predicated on the objective status of the project and the ability to control the individual elements within it to achieve a predictable outcome. (Lewis 1999, Turner 1999, Meredith and Samuel J. Mantel 2000, Kerzner 2001, Hartley 2003, Kodama 2007, Schwalbe 2007, Hartley 2009).

It is because of this objective status that project management can claim to provide the necessary predictive capacity for project success. As Kahneman (2011) notes, however, there is a psychological propensity to assume the control of outcomes that cannot be supported by the methods we use and “both in explaining the past and in predicting the future, we focus on the causal role of skill and neglect the role of luck. We are therefore prone to an *illusion of control*” (p.259). Project management assumes the control of an outcome when, in fact, the rational scientific method on which it is based is capable of controlling only the process (Zwikaël and Smyrk 2011).

As Chalmers observes (1976), the scientific experiment is set up to test predictions based on a hypothesis. Provided the variables in a scientific experiment are exactly the same each time it is run, the outcome can be predicted. This is what makes the scientific method so powerful. However, the outcome of the experiment is not under control, *only the process to obtain the outcome*. Critically in the scientific method, if the experiment does not produce the expected outcome, it does not mean the experiment has failed (pp.32–43).

Whilst the failure of the scientific experiment may have been as a result of poor experimental procedure, it may also be because the original hypothesis was incorrect, or the input variables themselves were not as expected. In any experiment, no matter how well controlled the process is, the outcome cannot be guaranteed if the original hypothesis was incorrect or the input variables have changed. The essence of scientific experimentation is the manipulation of a very small number of variables to test a hypothesis. If the method is sound and the variables are known, the accuracy or otherwise of the hypothesis can be determined (Chalmers 1976).

If we consider the project as an experiment (and this section argues that existing project management practice does this), then the project ‘solution’ constitutes a scientific hypothesis. Likewise, the constraints of time, cost and performance constitute the input variables, whilst the project management process itself constitutes the ‘method’ (Berkun 2005). If we accept this

comparison then a number of difficulties immediately arise, difficulties that serve to seriously impede the possibility of control in a project environment.

First, by definition a project is a unique undertaking (Turner 1999, Lewis 2007). This implies the variables in the project will be different each time. Different variables imply a different outcome. Watson (2002) points out that in the modern corporate environment, structures, strategies and aims can shift rapidly. Within such an environment, it is highly likely that projects will encounter significantly different variables, even between relatively similar projects. It is also highly unlikely the variables will remain constant during the period of the project, being regularly exposed to reinterpretation and revision (Turner 1999).

Second, and even more critically, the number of variables in a typical project far exceeds any that would be considered in a scientific experiment (Berkun 2005). The more variables considered in a scientific experiment, the less sure of the results the experimenter can be. Too many variables and the scientist cannot be sure which, if any, have affected the outcome. For this reason scientific experiments proceed by testing a hypothesis against the least number of input variables possible (Chalmers 1976). By contrast, the input variables to a project can number in the tens, or even hundreds of thousands, any one of which can affect the outcome in unanticipated ways.

Supporting this argument, Nicholas Taleb in *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (2008) has noted the propensity of relatively small, unanticipated consequences to exert a large impact upon activities in the human domain. These "black swans", as Taleb refers to them, are generally able to be eliminated in the course of scientific experiments (by reducing the scope of the variables) but are effectively unmanageable in the context of the human domain. Essentially, the larger the number of variables and the more inter-related they are, the more exposed we become to unanticipated (and essentially unknowable) events (Taleb 2008).

In summary, the psychological desire for control of outcomes (Kahneman 2011) has effectively blinded project management practice to the problematic application of scientific principles from the natural to human domains. The significant increase in the type and number of variables associated with project 'experiments' in the human domain lead to a susceptibility to rare events that are not generally encountered in the natural sciences. This, in turn leads to unintended consequences that effectively eliminate the possibility of control (at least in a manner analogous to a scientific experiment) in a project context.

The commitment of project management practice to a paradigm based in the natural sciences has also led to a significant contradiction in the way concepts of success and failure are attributed with the context of the project. As previously demonstrated, most projects fail in terms of the existing paradigm (Group 2009, Bloch, Blumberg and Laartz 2012, Flyvbjerg 2012), yet, as also shown, projects can still be considered successful for reasons that escape the paradigm itself. This leads to a contradictory notion in which project managers can be shown to have failed against the standards of their practice, even when the stakeholders celebrate the project as a success. This contradiction is a feature of the different ways in which the scientific and corporate domains justify 'success' (Flyvbjerg 2001).

As described in the previous section, the natural sciences seek to contribute to the body of human knowledge by setting up a hypothesis and then testing it against measurable observations. Although a positive confirmation of the hypothesis is desirable, a negative result is not equated with failure. A disproved hypothesis represents a contribution to knowledge (Chalmers 1976). Indeed, from the point of view of the scientific theory of 'falsification', as expounded by Karl Popper, a negative confirmation is more desirable than a positive one, and is the fundamental process by which science proceeds. No matter the number of positive confirmations of a hypothesis, it can never claim to have been 'proven', as the very next observation may yield a negative result.

A negative result however, immediately negates the validity of the hypothesis, allowing researchers to eliminate a fruitless line of enquiry and move onto other things (Herbert 2004).

Like the scientific experiment, the contemporary project management paradigm sets up an experiment called 'the project', and then aims to achieve a predictable outcome via a series of logical steps. The critical distinction is that neither project management practitioners nor the people to whom they are responsible respond to failed experiments in an organisational setting the way that natural scientists respond to theirs. The scientific perspective views success as a more accurate description of the physical environment than previously available, whether that description conforms to predicted outcomes or not (Chalmers 1976). The corporate sector, on the other hand, views success as the achievement of a specific outcome, one normally related in some way to a positive return on investment, but also taking into account a myriad of other factors, cultural, political and social (McShane, Olekalns and Travaglione 2013).

These additional dimensions of success and failure are commented on by Smith (2006) who notes in his analysis of a large corporate project in the UK:

Concepts of success and failure were regularly employed to describe both the project and the project manager. They were used extensively to assign and segment responsibilities, to claim achievement of a plan or partial plan, and to assign to others the blame for non-completion of plans. (p.202)

Smith argues that, while the existing project management paradigm treats success and failure as conformance or non-conformance to the plan, the corporation had a far more complex view in which success and failure were "socially constructed" and "emerging from the live activity of the project" (2006:191). Amongst the variety of forces influencing project success and failure were:

1. The demand for the inclusion of a particular set of corporate aims in the project (whilst at the same time excluding others)

2. The need for legitimacy amongst the project team in their new status and roles
3. The 'protection' of the project by the team members from various external parties
4. Attempts by stakeholders to 'associate' or 'disassociate' themselves from the project depending on their agenda (Smith 2006:199).

Ultimately, Smith argues, the various competing forces, both internal and external to the project, were intrinsic to the definition of success that was applied and "the creation of edifices of project order to underpin that success" (Smith 2006:200-201). By any conventional measurement the project would have been considered a 'failure'. This did not suit the over-arching management discourse, however, and the history of the project was re-written to suit (Smith 2006).

The implication of these observations is of an existing paradigm of practice that poorly equips project managers for the environment in which they operate. Whilst the corporate sector emphasises the control of outcomes as the basis of success, existing project management practices remain largely focused on the control of processes. In the social, political and cultural domains, the existing method of project management practice is unable to control the outcome of the projects to which it is applied. Also, and even more challengingly for project managers, the tools of their practice can frequently become the tools with which success and failure are retrospectively applied to the project, irrespective of outcome.

Despite the issues highlighted above, existing project management practices, based firmly in principles of scientific management, continue to be used extensively throughout the corporate sector and in an increasing number of industries throughout the Western world. Yet it does so with increasingly diminishing returns (Group 2009).

3.5 Chapter Summary

To return to the first set of questions posed at the beginning of this chapter: How and why did the existing paradigm of project management emerge and what political, social and cultural factors led to its adoption by the project management community? Why does a paradigm that appears so unsuitable in achieving its stated purpose, persist? And, what has been the impact of its persistence on concepts of success and failure in project management practice?

The genealogy conducted in this chapter has answered these questions. The emergence of project management as a profession in the 1950s was the result of a confluence of events, events that were driven by historical agency and contingent and critical in their realisation. The organisational activities of technical schedulers seeking to establish a professional identity, the enabling technology provided by the IT revolution and the agenda of political actors in the Cold War all combined to establish a rational perspective of project management as the dominant paradigm. That such a paradigm has been able to persist has been shown to be a result of its foundations in a deep tradition of scientific management.

It was the success of the naturalistic scientific principles on which scientific management was based that gave project management the legitimacy to sustain itself, despite the challenges of implementing a scientific paradigm in the domain of human practices. These challenges have centred on the differing approaches to control between the scientific and corporate paradigms. As a result, in adopting a naturalistic scientific paradigm in a human domain, project management has become trapped in a contradiction between two competing world-views.

The implication of this for the success or failure of projects has been significant. Whilst existing project management practices measure themselves internally against objective standards of time, cost and quality, a set of far broader social, political and cultural imperatives are brought to bear that fundamentally warp

these rational concepts of success and failure. Ultimately, it is project managers and the practice of project management that suffers from this.

Chapter 4 – Opening the Space of Project Management: The Hermeneutic Phenomenological Interview

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to outline the method of research used in the remainder of this dissertation. As the purpose of this research is to study the relationship between theory and the lived experience of project management practice, a combination of a hermeneutic and phenomenological method is used to support the thesis. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a methodology that addresses itself to the relationship between lived experience and theory. In adopting a hermeneutic and phenomenological method the thesis addresses the challenge raised by Cicmil (2006c), who called for “new trajectories” in project management research. In particular, Cicmil proposed research that “encouraged movement towards the creation of a vocabulary and a resource for a critical engagement between practitioners and academics”. Such research should strive to take practices “beyond the confines of the existing language, concepts and assumptions of project management” (p.119). This chapter aims to develop, therefore, the hermeneutic phenomenological method used to explore the lived experiences of project managers and extend the boundaries of existing practice.

Before detailing the specific hermeneutic phenomenological research method to be used in this dissertation, it is necessary to demonstrate that the method selected is appropriate to the nature of the enquiry. Prasad (2005) argues that such a demonstration is a necessary tenet of phenomenological research, and offers these words to incautious researchers adopting a less than rigorous approach to their enquiry:

Researchers need to make sure that research questions are conceptually aligned with theoretical assumptions and that the questions asked are meaningful to the tradition in which they are working. Thus, research questions dealing with matters of social and cultural meaning are entirely appropriate to the ethnographic and hermeneutic traditions, whereas

questions relating to social conflict, power, and domination are best informed by any of the critical traditions. In other words, researchers need to be aware of and demonstrate the connections between their empirical interests and the intellectual traditions they are drawn to. (pp.287–288)

These thoughts are echoed by Todres and Holloway (2003), who impress the need for an understanding of the various approaches in hermeneutic phenomenological research and their areas of overlap, to ensure a coherent and consistent position. (Todres and Holloway 2003).

As is characteristic of a hermeneutic circle, this chapter proceeds in a circular way: it is only by outlining the concept of lived experience that we can demonstrate the experience of a lived experience, and only by experiencing a lived experience does the concept of lived experience gain existential significance as a lived experience.

The chapter first establishes the basis of lived experience in the hermeneutic phenomenology initiated by Heidegger. Heidegger's (1996) hermeneutic phenomenology, in turn, provides the basis for Gendlin's (1996) method of 'focusing'. Heidegger allows us to see that inquiry into lived experience is circular and occurs through practices of disruption, and Gendlin's notion of "felt sense" allows us to operationalise circularity and disruption so as to arrive at lived experience. An outline of Gendlin's technique is provided in order to justify its use in the context of this research.

Having done this, the chapter then seeks to fully develop the technique of 'focusing' in an applied manner. It does so by providing the analysis of a 'focused' interview between myself and my supervisor for this dissertation. The interview here serves two purposes. The first is to elaborate the focusing method, as utilised in the interviews supporting this dissertation (contained in Part II). The second is to highlight my own disruption to my practice as a project manager, a disruption that serves as the experiential basis of this dissertation.

My interview proceeds step-by-step through Gendlin's Focusing technique, so that its individual elements can be understood. In this way the dissertation would have come full circle: showing the experience of lived experience through working through the concept of lived experience.

4.2 Heidegger's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience of human. Hermeneutic phenomenology assumes a human's first relationship to the world is not just one of consciousness of the world, but one of activity and engagement within the world (Lavery 2003). The world is experienced, for the most part, not as a series of objects, of which to be conscious, but as a network of items of equipment that are used for purposes designated by the human being: "The kind of dealing which is closest to us is ... not a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use" (Heidegger 1996:95). Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology is therefore the interpretation of a way of being in the world.

Heidegger (1996) uses the word 'Dasein' (or 'being there') to capture the essence of a way of being in the world. Dasein has no essential structure that precedes an experience of the world. Segal (1999) observes that, in Heideggerian thinking, Dasein *is* being in the world. For the most part, Dasein is not explicitly recognised. People are typically so absorbed in day-to-day activities that an awareness of their way of being in the world, or Dasein, eludes them. People interact with the objects of the world and seldom question the nature of the interaction. Such people are, as Heidegger puts it, in a constant state of familiarity with their way of being. It is only when everyday activities are disrupted in some way that this familiarity is challenged. When everyday involvement in the world is disrupted in some way, the familiarity we have with the world that is encompassed in habitual ways of doing things are

rendered explicit and there is an awareness of actually being aware (Segal 1999).

For Heidegger, disruption is the starting point of phenomenological research (Segal 1999). Disruption makes everyday activities a theme of explicit concern in their own right: "when an assignment [activity] has been disturbed -- when something is unusable for some purpose -- then the assignment becomes explicit" (Heidegger 1996:105). Putting it another way, Dreyfus (1991) notes that "normally, we do not notice that things are accessible; we just transparently use them, or notice the difficulty of access to them, but go on anyway. But if there is an obstacle I may have to stop and think about how to reach my goal" (p.138).

Disruption to everyday activity is frequently revealed as an experience of 'strangeness' (Heidegger 1993). In moments of 'strangeness' we become beings who question our particular way of being. Heidegger thinks "only when the strangeness of what-is forces itself upon us does it awaken and invite our wonder. Only because of wonder ... does the 'Why? [or 'how come?'] spring to our lips. Only because [of] this 'Why?' ... are we fated to become inquirers." In every questioning, it is not just the object or subject matter that is being inquired into, but the inquirer as well. "Every research question can only be put in such a way that the questioner as such is by his very questioning involved in the question" (Heidegger 1993:325). The strangeness brought about by disruptions to our everyday routines can therefore challenge more than just the way we do things. Sufficient attention to strangeness allows us to "become aware of new possibilities of what it is to be a human being" (Arnold and Fischer 1994:56).

The creation of new meaning via the interpretive act of hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry becomes inescapable as the interpreter is essentially forced to 'inject' meaning into the situation being interpreted (Phillips and Brown 1993). As the pre-existing meanings that an interpreter brings to the interpretation are actually 'always already' there, meaning is not an

independent entity, capable of being studied as if from a distance. Meaning is in no way contained within the object itself. Preconceptions should not be seen as obstacles to be overcome in the search for the hidden meaning of a situation or text, but rather the "apparatus without which nothing at all can be seen" (Eger 1993:8).

Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology emphasises that our prejudices actually provide the basis for our interpretation rather than constrain our interpretation (Arnold and Fischer 1994). Heidegger claims that we have access to the world only through an initial understanding of it, and our initial understanding is contained in our prejudices. Prejudices are what Heidegger calls the 'fore-structures' of understanding. Fore-structures of understanding implies the meaning derived from understanding is conditioned by the meaning brought to it (Segal 1999).

This raises one of the most significant objections to a hermeneutic phenomenological method of understanding. If all understanding is interpretation of what is there already, and interpretation is always framed by an existing pre-understanding, how does one ever break out of what is evidently a circular theory of our relationship to the world (Schmidt 2006)?

Heidegger himself acknowledges this objection when he asks, "How should it [hermeneutic phenomenology] produce scientific results without going in a circle?" (1996:152). The answer to this apparent conundrum is hinted at in Heidegger's use of the word 'scientific'. As Schmidt writes, "by 'scientific' Heidegger means a philosophically justifiable result rather than anything specific to the natural sciences" (2006:74). The problem of 'which comes first, our apprehension of the world, or our pre-understanding of the world?' is only generated within a methodology seeking a reduction of effects to first causes (Rorty 1991). Such a reduction is the aim of the epistemological method within the natural sciences. Hermeneutic phenomenology avoids this epistemological problem of the circularity of meaning by refusing the necessity to escape from the circularity. As Heidegger puts it, "to see a vitiosum in this circle and to look

for ways to avoid it, even to feel that it is an inevitable imperfection, is to misunderstand understanding from the ground up” (1996:153).

Hermeneutic phenomenology accepts the impossibility of escaping from the circularity of our understanding. Heidegger (1996) argues we are ‘always already’ within a way of being that denies the possibility of neutrality. We can do anything except not take a position towards our experiences. As Segal (1999) puts it, “not only does the human being’s sense of the world emerge from its activities within the world, but also its sense of self emerges from the ways in which it is involved in the world. It is our involvement in the world that shapes us into the kind of people that we are” (p.80).

4.3 The Research Method: Focusing

The research method adopted in this dissertation is based on the concept of ‘Focusing’ developed by Eugene Gendlin (1996). Gendlin’s notion of focusing is explicitly grounded in the hermeneutical phenomenology of Heidegger (Galvin and Todres 2012). The idea of focusing came about through Gendlin’s practice as a psychotherapist and his observation that psychotherapy was effective for some patients and not others. Gendlin asks: What allows some patients to garner valuable self-insight into their own practices as human beings and make significant improvements to their lives, whilst others languish in endless rounds of therapy and self-doubt? (Gendlin 1996).

Gendlin’s research into this question reveals those patients who display self-insight usually do so within the first two or three sessions. It appears to make little difference as to the techniques the therapist applies or what specifically is talked about. What those patients *do inside themselves*, Gendlin observes, makes the difference. What successful patients apply intuitively, Gendlin seeks to turn into a skill that could be taught (Gendlin 1996).

Focusing aims to put language to the bodily ‘felt sense’ of an experience. In other words, Gendlin’s method aims to provide an articulation of the

embodiment of lived experience, *as it is felt by the person experiencing it*. As such, the 'felt sense' precedes any conceptual or theoretical basis for the experience. The interpretation of the experience and an understanding of the meaning the experience holds only comes after the 'felt sense' has been articulated (Gendlin 1981).

Focusing is the physical sensation of a change or shift in bodily recognition of feelings. An awareness of this shift or change is what Gendlin terms the "felt sense" (p.6). A felt sense is not to be confused with an emotion. It is not the awareness of being angry, sad or happy. Indeed, to be unaware of being angry, sad or happy would be nonsensical. Awareness of being angry *is* anger (Gendlin 1996). A felt sense, on the other hand, remains unclear. As Gendlin puts it:

There are no ready-made words in the language for it and so it is hard to describe. Until now very few people understood it. Society, and thus also language, viewed only the resulting manifestations – thoughts, emotions, perceptions – not the felt sense. (Gendlin 1981:82)

Gendlin typifies the felt-sense through reference to sporting activity, and highlights the way in which hitting, kicking or striking a ball requires the co-ordination of hundreds of muscles in ways that are impossible to conceptualise beforehand, yet the sportsperson 'knows' when they are ready to strike. They cannot articulate how they know when they are ready to strike; it is simply felt within their body. It is an 'embodied' kind of knowing (Gendlin 1981:82-83).

Gendlin extends this recognition of the embodied aspect of our knowing into a distinct practice called focusing. Focusing is the technique by which an individual, with or without the assistance of a therapist, attempts to recover the felt sense of a particular problem (Gendlin 1996). Gendlin recognises that understanding a problem as an embodied kind of knowing is not merely limited to physical activities but to other kinds of problems as well. Problems are carried in a physical way. Awareness of the physicality of problems constitutes the felt sense. In the sporting analogy used, the problem is 'when to hit the

ball'. The felt sense instinctively arrived at reveals the moment to the individual (1981:10–15).

4.4 The Relevance of Focusing for General Research

The relevance of the 'felt sense' to general research is the complicity of body and language. Language is an extension of the body and, likewise, the body requires language in order to become more than itself. Language and the body are not separable or reducible to one another (Todres and Galvin 2008). The complicity between body and language is therefore the foundation of embodied research in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition. "The lived body, characterised as the messenger of the unsaid, provides possibilities for understanding situations that exceed any precise formulation or patterning of it" (Todres 2007:5).

An attention to the 'felt sense' is an act of sense-making, which attempts to put to language what the body already knows (Gendlin 1996). "Credible sense-making", Todres argues, "involves the emotional relief that happens when words are felt to serve the uniqueness of personal experience" (2007:71). By working through the bodily reactions to unique personal experience, words are put to that which had previously escaped description. The 'emotional relief' that occurs with such naming is described by Gendlin as a "body shift" (1996).

By focusing on the 'felt sense', the researcher works together with their subject to name the experience, always recognising the embodiment of the experience will exceed the articulation of it (Todres 2007). Even "the most general thing" about the experience of phenomena is opened up through its articulation in language to further descriptions of the same experience (Todres 2007:27). The process of interpretation never ends and a method founded in hermeneutic phenomenological principles only offers a snapshot of meaning at a particular point. In order to "faithfully show" the output of phenomenological research, it

is necessary to remain aware that phenomena are “pluralistic” and open to re-interpretation (Todres 2007:43).

Unlike therapeutic practice, it is not sufficient in phenomenological research for the named experience of the ‘felt sense’ to remain private. Once the researcher and the subject have together named the previously unnamed experience, the next activity is to effectively communicate the essence of the individual experience to others. A form of “inter-embodied” understanding must be established that allows the experience to transcend the merely personal (Todres 2007:31). If the description is too particular it will not resonate with anyone. If the description is too general it will lose its richness.

The tension between the particular and the general in phenomenological research is characterised by Todres (2007) as the difference between “texture and structure” (p.47). Texture refers to the capacity of the description to invoke the unique and personal characteristics of the experience for the individual. Structure refers to the capacity of the description to yield insight for others reading it. The challenge is to find a balance between texture and structure and to elaborate an individual experience in such a way that it remains faithful to the particular lived phenomena, whilst also attending to the thematic structure of the experience that will allow for the questioning of the phenomena by others (Todres 2000).

Prasad (2005) warns that issues of texture versus structure can arise when a researcher is so familiar with the environment that they will fail to appreciate features that are fundamental to a particular culture. Such features can frequently be immediately apparent to a foreigner. On the other hand, a researcher completely foreign to an environment may misunderstand the particular significance of the feature in that culture and thus trivialise or ignore it (Prasad 2005). In either case the balance in the description between the texture of the individual experience and the structure of the general themes will be displaced and the researcher will not have faithfully shown the output of

their research. This tension is of particular relevance to the research in this dissertation, as the author is a full-time practitioner in the field of enquiry.

Hermeneutic phenomenological research of the embodied variety must therefore “remember the freedom of the unique human occasion by expressing essences and themes, not as final and conclusive law-like absolutes, but rather as possibilities around which unique variations and actualities can occur” (Todres 2007:27). This requires a researcher to remain flexible in their approach whilst maintaining the necessary rigor. As Jankelson (2005) observes of phenomenological research in *Phenomenology and Leadership*:

Its delivery is delicate and, like a creative or artistic expression, requires openness and receptivity to its conception. Therefore, the researcher or the second person present becomes part of the knowledge formation, and the delivery is unique to that particular point in time. (p.7)

As Todres (2007) notes, attempting to ‘pin down’ the essence of phenomena is to confuse phenomenological research with epistemological enquiry. Epistemological enquiry seeks apodictic knowledge whilst phenomenological research seeks the meaning of the phenomena in question. Whilst both modes of enquiry seek a certain kind of truth, “truth in this [phenomenological] perspective is thus an ongoing conversation which is not arbitrary but which is never finished and depends on questions and context” (Todres 2007:74).

The “inter-embodied” understanding generated by phenomenological research ultimately serves three purposes: a concern for the human order with a language to support it, the grounding of research in lived experience and variable research results that open up possibilities rather than close them down with answers (Todres 2007). Building on the complicity between body and language, ‘inter-embodied’ understanding takes the named bodily felt sense that was the insight of a particular individual, and seeks to generalise it enough to make it useful for others.

4.5 The Focusing Interview

The purpose of the interview described below is to uncover a problem that the author of this dissertation is experiencing within his practice as a professional project manager. The interviewee is, therefore, both the author of this dissertation, and the person for whom an aspect of professional practice has become an issue. The interviewer for this interview is the author's PhD supervisor, Dr Steven Segal. The interview itself was conducted in two sessions, each approximately an hour long. Both took place in the first year of the author's dissertation, about a month apart, while the research question was still being framed. As such, the interview stands as both an aid to reflective practice in developing the principal thesis of this dissertation, and as an elaboration of the hermeneutic phenomenological method used in gathering data to support it.

The Focusing method itself consists of six specific "movements" (Gendlin 1996):

1. Clearing a space
2. Felt sense
3. Handle
4. Resonating,
5. Asking
6. Receiving.

The focusing technique is usually conducted in the form of a one-on-one interview. As a primary tool in qualitative research, the purpose of an interview is to "understand the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman 1991). Unlike quantitative information gathering, the interviewer is an adaptable instrument, capable of responding in a multitude of ways to the data that they gather and then re-framing the following questions to suit. This process of the interview therefore blurs the distinction between the

researcher and the researched. The researcher interprets responses to questions from the interviewee, which in turn alters the questions they ask. This in turn elicits a different kind of response, and so on. It is a continual interplay as the familiarity of the interviewee is challenged by the questions of the researcher. Their research in turn is rendered unfamiliar as the responses to their questions move them down hitherto unconsidered lines of enquiry (Arnold and Fischer 1994).

It should be noted that the focusing technique is presented here as taking place in a linear fashion. This is for the purposes of clearly demonstrating the progression of the six movements of the technique. In actuality, the technique does not proceed neatly from one movement to the next. The interviewer needs to remain sufficiently flexible to allow for the side tracking, circling back and retracing that inevitably occurs in semi-structured interviews of this type.

For the remainder of this chapter, I (the author) will speak in the first person in order to capture the reflective nature of the interview process. By following the six movements of the focusing method, Steven and I seek to name my problem through an attention to my 'felt sense'.

'Clearing a space' is the first movement in the act of focusing. 'Clearing a space' involves taking a moment to rest and pay attention to the body. By paying attention the tensions that we carry in our stomach, throat, head etc., we become aware of experiences that are typically taken for granted. It is important not to rush past this awareness and move directly into problem solving but rather to remain with the awareness of the experience as it is felt in the body and attempt to 'clear a space' for it (Gendlin 1996). Steven begins our interview by asking me what it is about project management that is causing me to question it:

There is no specific question I have ... it's just more a general uneasiness about my own work and understanding how it fit into a context. And so

it's the idea that there is a question to be posed, but half of the problem is going to be figuring out what the question is.

From the beginning, my problem is one that evades the traditional analytic definition of the term. What I have instead is 'uneasiness' about project management, something that is leading me to question but is not yet a specific question. 'Uneasiness' speaks to a bodily sense of discomfort, a troubled feeling that is holistic in that it does not affect simply one part of the body, but is carried everywhere. Steven works with me to 'clear the space' by asking me to acknowledge my 'uneasiness':

It [project management] is a very diffuse, diverse, very fragmented way of working, and so it was frequently posing the question of well, will all these little bits and pieces that I've done over the last 20 years add up to anything?

Further physical terms such as 'fragmented' and 'bits and pieces' are emerging as I continue to clear the space of my uneasiness. However, the temptation once a problem is raised is to try and solve it, to immediately reduce it to something that makes sense by naming it. This is something I start to do:

Initially I pursued the traditional course, I suppose, which is I tried to get better at the technique of my role. And I thought if I just get better at those techniques and those skills, out of that will come the legitimacy of what I'm seeking.

Very early in the interview I have decided that what I am seeking is 'legitimacy' for my work. However, Gendlin (1996) warns there is always a tendency to theorise as to the cause of a problem too early. The key to 'clearing the space' is not to dive straight into the experience uncovered but to acknowledge it and then allow other aspects of bodily awareness to come through. By leaping straight to the naming of my problem I am not allowing that awareness of my felt sense to emerge. Steven draws me away from theorising by asking: What is it like to be a project manager? Notice that the question is not 'what *is* a project

manager?’ or ‘what does a project manager *do*?’ These kinds of questions would tend to elicit a more objective response. By asking what project management is *like*, Steven helps maintain the focus on the felt sense:

I’ve worked for 20 different companies, and every time you move into a company it’s new, you’re fresh, it’s as if there’s no history that you’re bringing with you.

I am back to paying attention to my felt sense again. A qualitative word such as ‘fresh’ is a more useful expression in the context of focusing than a term such as ‘legitimate’. ‘Legitimate’ has a well-defined meaning whilst ‘fresh’ opens up a range of possibilities. ‘New’, ‘clean’, ‘spring’, ‘natural’ are all words evoked by the quality of ‘fresh’. Most importantly, ‘fresh’ hints at a positive aspect to project management that is in contrast to my previously described uneasiness.

By ‘clearing a space’ and not trying to immediately problem solve, an ambivalent attitude towards my work has been allowed to emerge. It is still unnamed, and therefore at this stage still evades the theoretical and conceptual constraints that such naming will inevitably bring it. However, by rejecting the immediate impulse to solve, the conversation is allowed to continue in the space of attentiveness to the experience itself. As a result, deeper aspects of the problem are brought forward.

The second movement in the act of focusing is the ‘felt sense’. As previously outlined, the ‘felt sense’ is an experience of the primordial. It is an awareness that emanates from the body without any intellectual or conceptual overtones. During the previous ‘clearing the space’ movement several different problems emerged. The point of the second movement is to focus on one and establish the ‘felt sense’ of that problem. In my case it was the ‘uneasiness’ I felt towards my work. It was not something I could easily describe, other than to acknowledge it as bodily presence, something that I carried around with me.

Steven and I now work to allow that sense of uneasiness to continue to emerge. Again, the problem is not something to be dived into and solved immediately. The temptation will be to find a cause or a reason on which to hang the uneasiness. Instead, this stage of the movement continues to avoid conceptualising, remaining with the bodily felt sense and acknowledging the feelings that emerge from it. Steven asks about the sense of the problem as whole:

I think that is a sense of frustration, and frustration's another feeling that is predominant along with the uneasiness. Frustration's probably the foreground one. Frustration with not being able to have a meaningful conversation ... It's so difficult to talk about what it is you do.

Another feeling is emerging from the 'felt sense' along with the uneasiness: frustration. Steven encourages me to stay with the frustration, not to try to analyse it, but try to get a more general awareness of it. In doing this, I allude to the careers of my parents, who had both recently retired. My father had been an army officer for nearly 30 years and then a senior public servant. My mother had been a primary school teacher for the same period of time. I cannot help but compare my working life to theirs:

The languages they used ... were consistent throughout the majority of their careers. If they were talking to someone else who was in a similar career to them, there was one language they spoke. It wasn't a multitude of languages, it was very cohesive, whereas mine is not that cohesive.

This digression into my parent's work-life has revealed another aspect of my felt sense: a lack of cohesiveness. A sense of my uneasiness with my work as relating in some way to a lack of cohesiveness is taking shape. It is not yet clear why this should be the case. The felt sense remains vague but we try to stay with the bodily sense of it. I am getting a little stuck and floundering for words so Steven asks me to reflect on a moment when I experienced that lack of cohesion in a profound way and try to remember what that was like. I

recalled leaving the office one day to have lunch with my sister and her partner, who were both in town for a few days. My brother-in-law is a site safety officer for large construction sites. As one would expect from a person responsible for ensuring the safety of others, he is an extremely pragmatic, no-nonsense sort of man who has not spent much time in the large office setting I was used to. He knew I was a project manager in the IT industry but he did not really know what that entailed. Quite innocently (I think!), he asked me what it was that I did every day:

*I remember trying to describe my role [to my brother-in-law] and he said no, no, I don't mean that ... I know you're a project manager, but what do you **do** every day? And I remember trying to describe to him what I did and I couldn't come up with anything concrete at all.*

In answering my brother-in-law's question, the fact I couldn't 'come up with anything concrete' spoke directly to my felt sense and my associated feelings of uneasiness and frustration. At this point, Steven commented that my brother-in-law was like the character of Xi, from the movie "The Gods Must Be Crazy" (1980).

In the movie, the principal character of Xi is a member of the Sho, an indigenous tribe living in the Kalahari Desert. The tribe is essentially a surviving fragment of pre-modern times, and has no knowledge of the outside world. One day, while out hunting, Xi comes across a coke bottle lying in the middle of the desert that had been discarded from a passenger plane that had been flying overhead. Xi takes the bottle back to the tribe.

Whilst the bottle is initially useful, it begins to cause friction amongst the tribe members. Unlike any other object in their world, it is unique, and therefore something that can only be used by one person at a time. When this friction leads to violence, the tribal elders demand that Xi take the bottle 'to the edges of the earth' and throw it away.

As Xi journeys away from his isolated region of the African desert he comes across a modern city. Xi sits in a tree at the edge of a city and watches the workers in an office building. As he sits there, though, he finds himself unable to distinguish one from the other by what they are doing. Nothing about the nature of their physical activities resonates with him, or helps him to understand what their actual function in this society is. Xi ultimately continues his journey, perplexed by what he has seen⁹.

Having seen the movie, I was immediately struck by the aptness of the metaphor it provides. Xi's sense of strangeness echoed my uneasiness. To Xi, each worker is doing exactly the same thing and therefore, in his eyes, they *are* exactly the same thing, though he cannot tell what that thing was. In Xi's daily life, each physical activity is distinct in itself. There are myriad activities in his pre-modern world such as hunting, fishing and cooking and if you are engaged in one of them, no further explanation is required as to what you are doing. In an office environment, however, our physical activities are not so clearly distinguished, as they are, by and large, exactly the same.

I am one of the office workers in that building and my brother-in-law is Xi. Once the title of project manager is stripped away, what remains for me are the physical activities performed, and on that count I am no different from a line manager, an accountant or a financier. Indeed, there is little to distinguish me from most other individuals in a corporate setting. There is nothing that appears to make my role *worthy of its own description*. The fact remains, though, that I am doing *something*, I just can't say what that something is. Steven and I talk further about this need to describe what I am doing to others:

I suppose that unease is generated by the fact that you're attempting to describe yourself and talk about yourself in certain ways, and yet what you're actually doing every day bears little relationship to it...

⁹ "The Gods Must Be Crazy" (1980), written and directed by Jamie Uys (South Africa) and distributed by 20th Century Fox. The character of Xi was played by Namibian farmer, N!xau.

As we continue to unpack my uneasiness, another aspect of it emerges. This time it hinges on the disconnection I am experiencing between the way I try and talk about project management and what it actually is I am doing at work every day. The problem of not being able to describe project management to others seems to be an issue for me. More critically, however, it appears that not being able to adequately describe my work to myself is a deeper issue still. I can give myself the title of 'project manager' easily enough, but when pressed it is very difficult to describe.

The third movement of focusing is putting a word or a 'handle' to the felt-sense of the problem. The previous movements have cleared the space of the problem and allowed the bodily felt sense of the problem to emerge. Feelings towards project management such as 'uneasiness', 'frustration', 'lack of cohesion' and 'disconnection' have emerged from this attentiveness to the felt-sense that is helping to frame the problem. The task now is to try to find a word or group of words that capture the overall quality of these feelings. Steven asks me to go further with the disconnection I experienced between project management as I try to describe it and project management as I actually practise it:

If you consider project management a language, there's this disruption of language ... it's not the actual language, it's a surface language of some kind. It's just used to mask real languages that are going on underneath.

Gendlin (Gendlin 1981) observes that, in the third movement of focusing, the problem may begin to change as different kinds of words come into play and serve to alter perspectives on the felt sense. Occasionally a new word will feel 'right' and this will be experienced as a bodily 'shift'. This is how it is for me when the word 'language' and the word 'mask' pass into the conversation. Something moves inside my body as if something has been revealed to me

about my problem with project management. Steven asks me what it is about these words that have resonated for me:

The tools that I'm actually utilising [in project management] are conversation, discussion, facilitation, negotiation, a fair degree of manipulation, a lot of manipulation [chuckling] of people and their attitudes ... and that's perhaps the skill I've got.

My rueful laugh after the mention of manipulation is perhaps the best indicator in the passage as to the source of my unease. I did not laugh at any of the preceding terms. I am obviously aware of the activities I am engaging in as a project manager, yet am clearly uncomfortable with some of them. Steven asks how it feels to be manipulating people:

There's the same feeling of uneasiness about that. Saying well, if all it is game playing, am I just a pseudo politician running around doing what I think is business?

I experience another bodily 'shift' here as 'game-playing' passes into the conversation. Something about the expression feels right. Steven enquires further into this aspect of my felt sense, asking me to unpack the handle of 'game-playing':

If I have gotten more successful [at project management] it's because I've learnt to find out what the game is that's being played in this particular place and in this particular time and, to a large extent, ignored most of the other rules.

I now feel like I have an initial handle on my felt-sense. 'Game-playing' speaks directly to the unease I feel about project management. Even as it does so, however, further aspects of the felt sense start to unpack. I realise that, like my earlier expression of 'fresh', there is a distinct ambivalence underpinning my feelings as I clearly associate 'game-playing' with being 'more successful' at project management.

The fourth movement of focusing is resonating. Resonating is the process of checking the handle obtained in the third movement against the felt sense. Does it still feel right? There should be, Gendlin (1996) maintains, a distinct feeling of release in the body that comes when a handle is a perfect fit for the felt sense. This does not always happen the first time and there may be a back-and-forward oscillation as various handles are tried on. It is important to check the words against the feeling of the felt sense. Gendlin (1996) notes that the initial felt sense can frequently disappear after words are first associated with it. In this case it is necessary to reconnect with the felt sense and re-establish the 'fit' of the words. This can often means different words become associated with the felt sense.

I still have a feeling of ambivalence associated with my handle on the felt sense from the third movement of focusing that I can only describe as a 'nagging' sensation. Steven asks me to dwell in that nagging feeling and try to identify what it is about project management that captures both the positive and negative aspects of my felt sense. For some time we go back and forth, trying out different words against my felt sense, looking for a bodily shift. Words such as 'languages', 'game playing' and 'mask' are resonating deeply with me. Steven and I toss them back and forth, playing with the words we have uncovered, seeing if any of them are a better fit to the felt sense of my unease:

So in a nutshell, I'm sort of a ... well, in ... in some ways I'm a translator between these language games. You know, there is a business language game, financial business game ... and then there's the IT department who are doing all of the changes, and their particular language game.

As soon as the word 'translator' passes into the conversation it feels right. There is a distinct bodily shift that is more profound in its sense of release than any of the preceding terms. In a stumbling, roundabout, awkward way I have acquired a handle to my felt sense and, as Gendlin (1996) observes, this is frequently the way it is. It is not an emotional response I am feeling. I am not elated or disappointed in what has transpired. Instead, it is as if something has

'clicked' in much the same way as if, falling back on the sports analogy again, I have struck a ball in the middle of the bat.

The fifth and sixth movements of focusing are asking and receiving. Once a distinct bodily shift has occurred, time needs to be spent ensuring that the handle acquired to the felt sense is still there. Is the word 'translator' still a good fit with my felt sense? Gendlin (1996) advocates asking two questions of the felt sense at this point. The first is "What is the worst of this?" The second is "What does the felt sense need?" The point is to let words and images flow out of the feeling of the felt sense and the handle of translator that you have given it. Steven begins by asking what the worst of my felt sense is:

When I started working, you know, 15, 16 years ago, it was all about finding out your career, joining a good company or finding a good company, and working your way through it. Yet I've found myself now in a role where there's no such thing. As I said, my title 15 years ago was project manager, and my title now is project manager. And yet it exists alongside ... or exists sort of uncomfortably alongside this knowledge that your own career and your own work ethic, the companies you work for, the contracts are all temporal, short-lived, highly prone to change. I mean, project managers like me float around following disruptions. I can almost pick what company I'm going to be working for in six, 12 months' time just by looking at, you know, the business pages and seeing what companies are buying other companies. When they merge or they acquire one another, there's huge disruptions in their technology as they try and join them altogether and people like myself end up flocking in there. We're not much good to companies in a period of stasis or stability. If they've been, you know, just growing steadily over a long period of time, they've got a stable technology infrastructure that they operate incrementally, no need for people like myself. We're not wanted.

The idea of not being needed by a company except in a period of crisis, of not being able to inscribe long-term goals against any particular company, obviously remains an issue for me. Steven then follows this up by asking how the handle of translator fits well with the uneasiness of my felt sense. Despite my misgivings about the function I perform, has my felt sense enabled me to articulate future possibilities for me?

Well ... if you move away from the discourse of correctness and answers, then you're left, by default, with possibilities. And it has to be possibilities. And it also gives you enormous flexibility in the day-to-day because you're always attuned to possibilities if you see yourself as simply operating in a field of languages. A new language emerges, a new understanding emerges, you're already there. In fact, you're the one helping to bring that new understanding into being all the time.

I am clearly excited now about the possibilities my new understanding has revealed to me. Despite my continued unease around the construct of my practice and the apparent lack of consistency it provides, I am now beginning to see how the disruptive nature of my work could possibly constitute one of its defining features.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the viability of a phenomenological approach to engaging with the problems of project managers and project management, and establish some principles on which the remainder of the research is predicated. Heidegger's (1996) hermeneutical phenomenology established our immediate and concrete experience as a valid starting point for the exploration of such problems. The most significant task of our thinking, according to Heidegger, is an attunement to the disruptions of our everyday experience, and an articulation of the questioning these disruptions produce.

Eugene Gendlin's (1981, 1996) psychotherapeutic technique develops Heidegger's phenomenology into a practical method for naming the problems of our experience. Gendlin's technique was used to examine the author's disruption in his experience as a project manager. By focusing on the 'felt sense' of their disruption, the author was able to experience a physical shift by naming the problem that had previously eluded him. In this case, the problem was a profound sense of unease about the nature of his practice, and the way in which he was able to describe it to himself and others.

The same technique is used in Part II of this dissertation, which seeks to develop expert or virtuoso competencies of project management through the lived experience of project practitioners. An attunement to the experience of disruption in their practices, using the technique of focusing, is the starting point for a hermeneutic and phenomenological exploration of project management practice.

Chapter 5 – The Philosophy of Ironism

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the philosophy of ironism as proposed by Richard Rorty (1979, 1982, 1989, 1991, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2007) in order to provide the reader with a general understanding of Rorty's work. I used philosophical concepts derived from Rorty's ironism to provide a thematic structure for the interviews I conducted to support this dissertation.

Ironism is Rorty's variation of a philosophical (or existential) hermeneutic. As Rorty outlines in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), an ironist is someone who meets three conditions:

1. She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered.
2. She realises that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts.
3. Insofar as she philosophises about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others. That it is in touch with a power not herself. (Rorty 1989:73)

Rorty's ironism therefore denies the possibility of extrinsic or intrinsic sources for our notions of 'self', and describes attempts to found our narrative on either as the vestiges of a metaphysicalism that has its antecedents in Greek thought. This chapter outlines Rorty's thinking, beginning with his critique of modern philosophical attitudes that are constrained, he argues, by the inherited metaphors of the Enlightenment. It then examines the primary counterpoint to this attitude that Rorty identifies in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger and John Dewey. Out of their thinking, Rorty develops his own variation of the 'existential hermeneutic', one founded in the concepts of irony and redescription. The chapter finishes with a brief review of some of the central criticisms of Rorty's work, and argues that these criticisms do not

constitute a fatal flaw to the notion of ironism as a useful construct for a project management competency framework.

5.2 The Mirror of Nature

In one of his earlier and most influential works, *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty outlines a criticism of the foundations of the narrative framework that we have inherited. Whilst Rorty does not utilise the term 'ironism' in this work, he does introduce the key points that underpin ironism in his later efforts. Rorty's central contention is that, courtesy of Enlightenment philosophers, we have embedded in our culture a number of dominating metaphors that have, without suitable questioning, been allowed to overshadow large areas of activity in the natural and human sciences. As Rorty observes:

We owe the notion of a 'theory of knowledge' based on an understanding of 'mental processes' to the seventeenth century, and especially to Locke. We owe the notion of 'the mind' as a separate entity in which 'processes' occur to the same period, and especially to Descartes. We owe the notion of philosophy as a tribunal of pure reason, upholding the claims of the rest of culture, to the eighteenth century and especially to Kant but this Kantian notion presupposed general assent to Lockean notions of mental processes and Cartesian notions of general substance. (Rorty 1979:3-4)

Rorty characterises the notions of Locke, Descartes and Kant as 'metaphors'. As Rorty understands it, a metaphor is a tale or story that serves its place in the broader culture or society by helping us to make sense of our lives. In epistemological terms they are fictions, and the subversive character of Rorty's thesis becomes clear when you consider his contention that epistemology itself is a fiction, and the very idea of a "theory of knowledge" is predicated on a set of metaphors created and maintained by our collective imaginations. If we

disregard these metaphors, Rorty claims, then what remains for philosophical examination is only personhood (Rorty 1979:125-127).

The first of the metaphors that Rorty explores is the notion of a mind that is a "Glassy Essence". "Glassy Essence", for Rorty, is the idea of the mind as an immaterial yet substantive 'thing' in, or on which natural objects are reflected for us to peruse via our senses (1979:125-127). Spillane and Martin (2005) have argued this metaphor has become so pervasive in our language that it is difficult to construct a theory of human behaviour that does not reference it in some way. Rorty's point is that our intuition of objective, quantifiable mental states or processes is one that we have *courtesy* of our language rather than any sensible, grounded criteria that exist independently of it (1979:17-22). So ingrained has the idea become that our very sense of uniqueness is based on our intuitions concerning us having a 'mind'. Our intuitions, however, are merely our grasp of a language in which 'problems' such as our mind's separation from the body, non-spatiality and our grasp of universals are raised. Because our language poses these problems of mind, Rorty says, we believe we have one (1979:32-38).

Rorty sets out to challenge the 'mind' idea by conducting an excavation of its origins. From Plato, he argues, we have inherited the idea of *higher forms* (the extrinsic) and from Aristotle a *naturalistic essentialism* (the intrinsic). Rorty sees both of these ideas coalescing, more or less, during the period of the Enlightenment, when philosophers reified the processes of our brain into the structural concept of the mind or "the immaterial thing that thinks". As Rorty points out, we believe we have a mind primarily due to the dualism of Descartes. As Cottingham (2003) notes, Descartes achieved this by attributing a variety of previously diverse modes of being such as pain, feelings, thoughts and so on into a single substance called 'mind', and established their criteria for being so as their *indubitability*. Rorty observes, though, that, whereas Plato had previously made doubt a characteristic of our mind (in the sense the Greeks understood 'mind'), Descartes now made a lack of doubt the criteria for anything that constituted the mind. Ergo, if you did not doubt your pain, it

existed and could be the subject of epistemological study (1979:45-61). It was this construct that was able to accommodate both the grasp of abstract universals that a notion of higher forms requires, whilst also providing room for the biological traits of a naturalistic essentialism (now generally described as 'personality traits') (Spillane and Martin 2005). The mind had become the seat of both the extrinsic and intrinsic possibilities of our narrative identity, offering both a rational platform from which to launch our enquiries about 'the truth' and 'the good', or a murky pit from which we attempt to extract our intuitions of the same (Rorty 1979).

Though Rorty for the most part thinks that the work of Quine, Sellars, Wittgenstein and others in the 20th century have done much to eradicate the modern picture of the mind as developed by Descartes and others, he nonetheless observes that the dualism of "ape and essence" survives and pervades the more contemporary notions of 'consciousness' and 'awareness' that have replaced, to a large extent, 'the mind'. He concludes that any doctrine that infers mental states from behaviour (such as most forms of psychology) are fundamentally in error (1979:213-220). Rorty maintains that psychology may safely use physiological processes *as if* they were mental processes for the sake of constructing working models, as long as they do not infer justification for behaviour in those models as *belonging* to mental states (1979:257-266).

That the mind idea persists, Rorty argues, can be seen in our pursuits of the 'higher' form of activities such as mathematics and their ineradicable commitment to generalised forms of knowledge. The very nature of their abstraction and our ability to comprehend their 'perfection' seems to lend weight to Platonic, metaphysical notions that we would otherwise deny; namely, that our mind and its ability to comprehend that which is incomprehensible to other creatures are what makes us 'unique' (1979:38-45). Tsoukas and Mylonopoulos (2004) argue it is perhaps for this reason that local and particular forms of knowledge have always been deemed inferior to the universal and the abstract.

Our continuing fascination with the universal and the abstract, argues Rorty, is to our detriment. What it has ultimately allowed for is a continuing fascination with a reality independent of our language. We do not simply talk about things; we have them 'in mind'. The structuralism of the mind concept has left us confused about what it is we are doing when we talk or write (Rorty 1979). The written and spoken forms of our communication are nothing more than 'noises and marks' that we make to get what we want. The expressions we form with our hands or mouth are not representations of the true nature of reality, but simply our attempts to manipulate that reality for our own ends by communicating with others around us. The universe does not conform to our 'grunts and scratches' (to put Rorty's expression another way) any more than it does to the screech of a monkey. If we speak of 'moral intuitions' or 'the greater good' or 'virtue', it is because, by sheer chance, people in this location, at this time, use that kind of linguistic convention to express what it is they require someone else to do (Rorty 1999).

Rorty continues on in his work to introduce the further, conjoined metaphor, of "Mirrored Representation" (1979:164-171). This metaphor draws on the metaphor of "Glassy Essence" and extends it by inferring that whatever is 'imprinted' on our mind constitutes an accurate or 'mirrored' representation of the object we see *as it is* in the natural world. We are therefore in the privileged position of having access to the natural world and its objects *without conceptual mediation*. Rorty argues forcefully that this position itself implies a conceptual framework, and that to continue to believe that it doesn't also constitutes it as a metaphor. Such is the power of this metaphor – that when we observe something in the world we do so *as it is* – that all argument since has taken place within its constraints regardless of the general doubts reserved in contemporary thinking for the pre-requisite metaphor of the 'mind' (1979:131-134). Yet without the pre-requisite metaphor of the mind, it is difficult to see how an epistemological attitude that holds to the idea of privileged representation can be maintained. If we ignore the metaphor, suggests Rorty, we can ignore the chief problem of epistemology: the accuracy

or otherwise of the conceived 'mirrored representation' that constitutes our knowledge (1979:125-127).

5.3 Purifying Philosophy

Rorty's principal thesis, therefore, is that philosophy from Descartes onwards has been concerned primarily with general theories of representation: what we can, at bottom, know and not know. This 'foundationalist' attitude was threatened, however, by the schism developing in the 20th century between the exponents of the natural sciences and its critics. This break was typified by the work of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey, who in their early work tried and failed to provide a single context within which all philosophical thought could take place. Instead, Rorty argues, they 'set aside' the possibility of epistemology and metaphysics as separate studies for a revolutionary approach that includes broader aspects of human activity. This revolution is a specific challenge to the systematic disciplines of the Descartes, Locke, Kantian tradition which attempts to place all knowledge within a framework understandable *a priori*.

Traditional philosophy's fundamental paradigm, according to Rorty, is that of the mind as a mirror, and the representations we collect in our mind are thus more or less accurate reflections of our reality. Traditional philosophical frameworks, therefore, fail to understand that our concept of an accurately describable and therefore completely knowable reality is a metaphor constituted within a historical and social tradition (Rorty 1979:3-13). As such, he sees the certainty of our apodictic truths as actually chosen, and chosen from a range of metaphors that have their roots in the Western philosophical tradition. By tracing the development of these metaphors in our language, Rorty demonstrates the contingent aspect of our 'truth making' and its central claim on our understanding of the world.

Rorty's key claim is that the philosophical outlook of Western modernity has inherited the Descartes, Kantian and Locke side of the schism described by Rorty, when it could have been better served by inheriting that of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey. Why this should be so can be reflected on in Rorty's argument that there has been since Greek times a desire to 'found' philosophy on something irrefutable. From the 17th century onwards, that founding 'first' philosophy became epistemology. The ancient tradition of 'grounding' knowledge is built on the distinctions between the contingent facts of the senses and necessary truths of the intellect and an overwhelming desire to seek justification of what we know – that is, there is an irreducible *cause* to what we know rather than just varying degrees of certainty about which we can reason. The implication of Rorty's position is that we in modernity are situated within a tradition of which the justification of knowledge simply happens to be a part (Rorty 1979).

Progressing his point, Rorty sees the modern attitude towards knowledge, not as a natural 'given' arrived at through the power of logical reflection, but as a series of philosophical and historical "mistakes" (Rorty 1979:158). For example, he sees Locke as making the mistake of confusing justification with a causal relationship when he predicated concept on intuition, and then Kant making a further mistake when he first (correctly) synthesised intuition and concept, but then predicated that synthesis on a 'mind'. The 20th century picture of what Rorty calls 'privileged representation' is based therefore on a historically developed and dominating metaphor (stemming originally from the Greeks) of requiring our beliefs to be consubstantial with the object of belief. All subsequent discussion on the nature of knowledge has taken place within the constraint of that metaphor (Rorty 1979:155-164).

Rorty characterises a mode of inquiry contained within an abstracted and universalised notion of language as an 'impure' philosophy and sees it as a continuation of the epistemological tradition of Kant which sought to establish a "permanent a-historical framework for enquiry" (Rorty 1979:257). 'Pure' philosophy, on the other hand, is that as undertaken by Wittgenstein in

attempting to provide a clearer picture of linguistic terms such as 'truth' and 'meaning'. The 'pure' approach denies that there are, within language, two distinct elements: the descriptive framework and the thing described. Rorty draws on writers, such as Davidson, who have argued that language is not about the analysis of individual terms within a framework but only the understanding of the relations between those terms (i.e. no further analysis can be undertaken on the expression "snow is white" except to understand the context of its utterance) (Rorty 1979:257-266).

Rorty therefore rejects the pervasive belief that science, courtesy of Enlightenment philosophy, has provided us with any language-independent objective reality. He points to Quine, who maintains that there could be no 'neutral observation language' separating analytic statements of fact from synthetic statements of belief. The 'impure' response to this problem was to continue the search for the 'common referent' in scientific theories to preserve the epistemological status of language. The purpose of this search was to relate linguistic terms to the objective reality it described in such a way that there could be no variation in the meaning of those terms. The reality was that 'meaning invariance' (as Paul Feyerabend called it) did not exist and no suitable analysis could be undertaken of 'meaning' in the Kantian a-historical sense (Rorty 1979:266-273).

Rorty observes that the attack on objective truth begun by Quine and continued by Kuhn and Feyerabend highlighted the distinction between two broad perspectives on the nature of our reality and our attempts to understand it. The idealist position is that there is no objective truth outside of the frameworks with which we describe them. The realist position is that, because we cannot describe a thing in theory-neutral terms, it is wrong to infer that there are no theory-neutral things. Rorty's position is simply to deny the relevance of the debate between those points of view. He asks: "What would we lose if we had no a-historical theory-independent notion of truth?" Rorty's answer to his own question is: very little of philosophical importance because "most of what

passes for discussion of 'truth' in philosophy books is, in fact, about justification" (Rorty 1979:281-282).

5.4 An 'Existential' Hermeneutic

In challenging the privileged position of science within our culture, Rorty interrogates a wide range of sources to inform his existential hermeneutic. He manages to fuse Heideggerian phenomenological insights into the human condition with Dewey's pragmatic views on the possibility of knowledge and Wittgenstein's theories on the linguistic nature of understanding, before incorporating them all within a Kuhnian perspective on paradigm incommensurability. Without seeking to oversimplify such a complex synthesis, the principal idea underpinning Rorty's thesis is that our language provides both the context and the content of our meaning and all 'truth' is simply a matter of social justification (Guignon and Riley 2003).

Rorty's critique of the course of Western philosophy since the Enlightenment suggests that the philosopher can now play one of only two roles, that of the Hermeneutist, "... the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses ... or the Platonic philosopher-king of Epistemology" (Rorty 1979:317). Epistemological style debate occurs within a certain paradigm in which the standards of evaluation (and therefore rationale) are already known. Hermeneutic debate, on the other hand, occurs between paradigms, where to seek a common standard of ground would be *irrational* (Rorty 1979:315-322).

Rorty predicates his existential hermeneutic by challenging the privileged position of scientific knowledge. He appropriates Kuhn's observation that theories are not neutral but 'value-laden' and scientists bring their own social and historical context to bear on their inquiry (Kuhn 1996). In doing so, Rorty dismisses the idea of universal, objective knowledge, that is, any theory that holds for all scenarios, in all places, and for all times. Any theory developed is

contextual and stands against a background of the pre-existing knowledge, social circumstances and personal history of the individual or individuals who developed it. This does not mean, as many critics of Rorty suggest (Putnam 2000, Taylor 2003), that everything is therefore 'subjective'. This, as Rorty observes, is to confuse 'subjectivity' with 'personal judgment' rather than as merely opposed to objectivity. What Rorty is opposed to is the idea that there can be such a thing as 'objectivity' that is not in some way framed by the social. What Rorty thinks is typically considered 'subjective' by his critics is that which others of similar minds think is irrelevant to the debate. Paradoxically, Rorty argues, they are therefore in subjective agreement to what is considered subjective, not objective. When the same critics point out the successes of the scientific method, Rorty simply observes that because science is a "value-based enterprise", and still produces results, should not surprise us any more than how people with values "could still produce bombs" (Rorty 1979:341).

Rorty's position is frequently interpreted as an attack on scientific principles and the possibility of knowledge (Putnam 2000, Steib 2005). The main thrust of the opposition to his thinking is that he is, at bottom, denying the existence of 'reality' and thus stands accused of a certain kind of idealism. If, however, we consider Rorty's position on epistemology as concerned with *finding out* and on hermeneutics as concerned with *making*, the direction of his argument becomes clearer. Referring to Sartre, Rorty observes that man is simply different from atoms and inkwells. The language we use to describe the things we find is not that useful to describe the things we make. Rorty recognises that the world would continue to be even if man and hermeneutics disappeared and this distinguishes it from the idealist position. A simple way of putting it is that epistemology studies nature or the familiar, and hermeneutics studies the spirit or unfamiliar. Whilst acknowledging the possibility that physicalist notions may one day predict human behaviour, Rorty disputes that this would even then provide science a privileged place in our discourse. Knowing the next move is not the same as knowing its meaning (Rorty 1979:343-356).

Rorty does not, therefore, deny science or its representational metaphors a place in our society, but rather denies them a privileged place in our discourse (Rorty 1979:357-365). The difficulty with this position, as Holroyd observes, is that:

Contemporary culture holds the physical world and its tangible objects in high regard. This respect is based on a *culturally situated awareness* of empirical science and the way that it has earned a reputation for delivering important objective truths. (Holroyd 2007:1) [my italics]

Whilst it is important not to 'devalue' the contribution of the natural sciences to human science research, it is also important to recognise that this method alone is inadequate to describe all facets of the human experience, let alone provide an understanding of it (Holroyd 2007). That we can adopt such an approach comes with the recognition, as noted by Holroyd, that our respect for science is 'culturally situated' rather than an intrinsically given relationship to reality. Whilst scientific discourse has provided the basis for extraordinary advances in such areas as physiology, biology, physics and chemistry, that same discourse, when applied to the human aspects of our activities have not been so successful (Benner and Wrubel 1989). Whilst initially an edifying philosophy of hermeneutics might appear dangerous to science and activities based upon its principles because it has the potential to relativise it, if used correctly it can actually support these endeavours by demonstrating more fully how they are a part of this world rather than separate from it (Eger 1993).

5.5 Irony & Redescription

Following the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty sought to expand on these ideas. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) he brought the various threads of his critique together under the concept of ironism, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Ironism fundamentally rejects the metaphysical underpinnings of our language and enables us to

ignore the accuracy or otherwise of our description of things. What ironism demands, instead, is an attention to how well such descriptions enable us to deal with those things. If a particular description does not work for us then a new description is required. An ironist, therefore, is someone who acknowledges the contingent nature of our language and acknowledges the descriptive terms with which we outline our needs, morality and values could just as easily have been something else. There is no historical force of progress or conformance to reality to suggest our current language is necessarily better than any that has passed, or will be necessarily worse than any to come (Rorty 1989).

Whilst Rorty therefore agrees that we need some kind of organising principle around which our narratives can cohere, we do not require either an extrinsic or intrinsic basic for one. To elaborate his point, Rorty draws a distinction between people who are comfortable with what he terms their "final vocabulary" and people who have a sense they have been born into the "wrong language game", people whom Rorty calls ironists (Rorty 1989:75). For people in the former category, the fundamental axioms of their vocabulary are the metaphysical terms about which they will not argue. They are 'final'. For instance, someone may just know they have certain instincts or intuitions about the difference between right and wrong. Whilst the application of those instincts and intuitions in everyday situations may be debated, the fact they have those instincts will not. Metaphysical terms are, for the people of modernity, what spears and axes were for the people of pre-history: tools for ending the debate (Rorty 1979:365-372).

The ironist, on the other hand, does not share this final stance towards their vocabulary. They remain acutely aware of the contingencies of their language, cognisant that the terms they have available to express their deepest fears and darkest desires gain meaning from their relationship to other terms but not to anything that stands outside of language such as intuition or greater purpose that corresponds to 'the truth'. Terms invested in notions of 'truth' are simply ways of saying 'stop talking about it'. The ironist sees other languages as

offering further opportunities for self-exploration, without seeing any as offering a more accurate description of their reality, only a more useful one (Rorty 1989). As Ernst Gellner puts it, language is not about “transition from illusion to ultimate truth but from illusion to controlled doubt and irony” (Gellner 1978:81).

Ultimately, what separates Rorty’s ironist from everyone else is her disregard for a sense of purpose invested in anything other than the ends towards which her language is deployed. What matters for the ironist is that a vocabulary has provided her with all the necessary tools for her project of self-creation, a project Rorty calls *redescription*. As Rorty puts it, “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (Rorty 1979:379-389) and he explains redescription as the “project of self-creation through the imposition of one’s own idiosyncratic metaphoric” (Rorty 1989). Language, for Rorty, consists entirely of terms in a transition between one of two states: metaphor and dead metaphor (or literalness). A metaphor is simply the use of old words in unfamiliar ways, and it is the unfamiliarity of the usage that gives the expression its transformational power (Rorty 1989).

Sometimes, Rorty argues, the new, unfamiliar expression catches on and falls into general use. The expression becomes a familiar one and the metaphorical nature of it dies. It is now literal or ‘dead’ (Rorty 1989). Rorty uses the example of the ‘mouth of a river’ to highlight his point. When first used it must have seemed a strange expression, for only animals actually ‘had’ mouths, but something about the usage of it appealed, the imagery it excited stayed in our consciousness, and we now speak quite literally of the mouth of a river (Rorty 1989). Whilst this linguistic process is itself well understood, what is critical in Rorty’s conception of it is how it applies to all our linguistic terms. Every expression we have in our language originated as a metaphor, and through the contingencies and vagaries of our history, the ones we use have settled into literalness (Rorty 1989).

Ironism is therefore the recognition of the metaphorical nature of our language and the ever-present possibility of redescription. The disruptive effect of using old terms in new and unfamiliar ways is what the ironist seeks and sees as necessary in her personal projects of self-creation (Rorty 1989). Frazier calls redescription the “engine of self-creation” and sees Rorty’s ironist as wanting to “relate autonomously to their inherited vocabularies” by “getting out from under them” (Frazier 2006:462). Rorty’s notion of self is therefore the product of the vocabulary we have available to us through chance, and we are free to play with that vocabulary. The alternative is to see some expressions in our vocabulary as permanently fixed and constant, as cohering to something outside of language and making a redescription of it nonsensical. The refusal to accept such expressions as only metaphors is to submit to a ‘final vocabulary’ about which no further discussion can take place (Rorty 1991:160-163).

The tension in Rorty’s conception of selfhood is built into the ironist’s effort to transcend her final vocabulary, whilst at the same time acknowledging that it is not possible (or even, one could argue, desirable) to completely ignore it. As Rorty puts it:

Being is what final vocabularies are about. A final vocabulary is one we cannot help using, for when we reach it our spade is turned. We cannot undercut it because we have no meta-vocabulary in which to phrase criticisms of it. (Rorty 1991:37)

Another way of putting it is to say who we are right now is defined by what we take for granted in our vocabulary. Who we might become depends on what we are prepared to ‘play’ with: “Historical narratives about social and intellectual movements are the best tools to use in tinkering with ourselves, for such narratives suggest vocabularies of moral deliberation in which to spin coherent narratives about our individual lives” (Rorty 1991:163). Ironism then, would not seem an either/or proposition, but a question of degree. How much we are prepared to ‘tinker’ with the terms of our moral deliberation ultimately determines the depth of our ironism.

5.6 Defending 'Ironism'

The implications of Rorty's position are profound and his work has attracted numerous critics (Collier 1994, MacIntyre 1998b, Putnam 2000, Best and Kellner 2001, Thompson 2001, Bernstein 2003, Taylor 2003). The nuances of all the arguments put forward are well beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, at the risk of over-simplifying a complex debate, the core of the criticism seems to revolve around whether or not Rorty, at bottom, denies the possibility of truth. This, as one of Rorty's contemporaries Charles Taylor contends, would place him firmly in the realm of the 'postmodern' philosopher for whom "all views are shrouded in equal darkness" (Taylor 2003:176). For his part, Rorty does not seem to imply that there is no truth, only that truth is a matter of social justification. What we call true is simply that which we are able to justify within the context of our tradition and culture. The truth, as Rorty puts it, is simply a "warranted assertion", and that warrant is provided by society (1979:273-284).

The essence of Rorty's position is that epistemology and the sciences underpinned by it are just another social tradition. He grants science no special status for accessing eternal truths, and when science does make this claim it is subscribing to the metaphors of "Glassy Essence" and "Mirrored Representation" (Rorty 1979). As A.F. Chalmers points out, this position is unacceptable to realists of the positivist school, who argue that science is not simply one more language among others but that it constitutes a meta-language that refers directly to a real world of value-neutral things. Propositions expressed in scientific language are not therefore 'value propositions' or 'warranted assertions' justified within a particular paradigm, but statements about how the world actually is, and to deny this is to deny reality itself (Chalmers 1976).

The realists of this 'naïve' positivist school, in their criticism of Rorty, tend to fall easily on the sword of what philosopher Roy Bhaskar calls the "epistemic fallacy", which is the confusion of "knowledge of the thing" with the "thing

itself", examples of which include assuming something exists only because we can know it exists, the categorisation of a thing in relation to how we know about it, or the mistaking of 'what object we know about first' for a 'cause and effect' relationship (Bhaskar 1975). As Andrew Collier observes, Bhaskar's own more nuanced critique of Rorty's position avoids this error by charging Rorty with a kind of 'super-idealism' that reduces everything to discourse and, in denying any external referents for that discourse, removes the possibility for improvement from one discourse to the next (Collier 1994:77).

For his part, Rorty clearly does not deny that there is a real world, only that we cannot ever have a theory-independent notion of it. He observes that, traditionally, when a theory 'refers' to the real world, there is an expectation that the world is 'at one' with the object referenced (Rorty 1979). Rorty simply thinks this can be avoided with a more commonsense (intuitionist) approach, which 'talks about' an object. There is no need to separate the truth from warranted assertability unless you are attempting to justify a theory of reference. Scientific propositions are simply attempts to render a certain aspect of our universe, the physical part, intelligible (Rorty 1979:284-295).

Given that scientific propositions are constantly being revised, and most people would expect that even the most sacred truths of science will someday be replaced by something that constitutes an even more useful description, Rorty's position of 'warranted assertability' seems unremarkable (Bernstein 2003). Richard Bernstein, in elaborating on Rorty's pragmatism, refers to Sellar's seminal work, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" and argues "empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension science, is rational, not because it has a foundation, but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once" (Bernstein 1995:63).

Despite this, Rorty's detractors remain vociferous. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner maintain that "Rorty is only one step away from Baudrillard, the self-proclaimed 'intellectual terrorist' who prefers simply to blow up ideas with unsubstantiated claims and outrageous exaggerations rather than attending to

matters" (2001:104). Simon Thompson thinks that "Rorty leaves us adrift in a nihilist universe" (2001:36), whilst Hilary Putnam observes that "... to say, as Richard Rorty once did, that 'I view warrant as a sociological matter ...' is simply to capitulate to a form of cultural relativism" (2004:115). And Alasdair Macintyre argues that "unlike Rorty, I believe that there are strong and substantive conceptions of truth and rational justification – Aristotelian and Thomistic conceptions of truth and rational justification – that remain unscathed by his critique of epistemological foundationalism" (1998a:265).

Alan Malachowski (2002) sheds a potentially revealing light on these (and other) criticisms of Rorty's position when he observes:

He [Rorty] wants us to scrap much of the rhetoric closely associated with many of traditional philosophy's most cherished notions, such as 'reality', 'truth', 'knowledge', 'mind', 'rationality' and 'morality'. But what makes him so provocatively 'interesting' is that he maintains we can do this without thereby having to lose our grip on effective standards of inquiry, useful norms of behavior and so on. (Malachowski 2002:4)

Malachowski's comment contains within it a hint as to what might lie behind the ferocity of the assaults on Rorty's anti-epistemological stance. What is at stake is not so much our knowledge of the world, which, as Rorty tells us, is only ever the best description currently available, but rather our "grip" on "effective standards of enquiry." As Malachowski points out, Rorty does not believe we have to give up standards *per se*, only that they will be contextual and that we should measure their value by their usefulness rather than some universal criteria that attempts to encompass *all* standards at *all* times in the manner of positivistic science (Malachowski 2002). What Rorty's position represents (and again, perhaps explains the ferocity of the criticism) is a potential loss of control. Positivistic science offers, within its schema, an apparently high degree of control in relation to the objects of its enquiry. And where there is a high degree of control, there is also an attendant high degree of predictability.

It is this control, and the predictability that comes from control, that perhaps provides the insight to the allure of the natural sciences and the dominance of its theoretical framework, epistemology, since the 17th century. In many ways, that allure is not misplaced, simply misunderstood. Rorty notes that the attacks of Quine, Sellars and Wittgenstein on the privileged representations of the inner realm, do not destroy truth, they simply clear the way to an understanding of its justification within a social context. Epistemological theories no longer need to serve as the fulcrum upon which all our beliefs turn; we can instead give space to the competing claims of science, religion, maths and the other languages to which our culture subscribes (Rorty 1979:209-213).

The final objection to Rortian irony and the process of redescription is the charge of moral relativism. In the sense used by his detractors, a relativist is one who holds to no moral values or standards of enquiry and for whom, in the words of Charles Taylor, "all views are shrouded in equal darkness" (Taylor 2003:176-177). Taylor thinks that we cannot, as Rorty suggests, do away with the scheme/content distinction because it is quite plausible that one scheme provides for a better description of reality than another, and to step out of the scheme/content distinction altogether denies the possibility of that occurring (Taylor 2003). The practical implications of this objection can be summed up as: "How does one live and work in a world where one does not believe the standards that underpin it are anything more than linguistic convention?" Rorty finds the solution to that challenge in his synthesis of Heideggerian hermeneutics with the pragmatism of John Dewey, amongst others. Rorty's pragmatic infusion allows him to develop an idea of "what works for us" as an organising principle for narrative structure (Rorty 1982).

Rorty notes that as a human living amongst other humans, and by and large dependant on those humans for our survival, what works for us is getting what we need from others through the utilisation of a shared language. By doing so we are able to effectively predict another's behaviour and avoid conflict. Our indulgence in the metaphysical expressions of a language game (our society's

final vocabulary) are a pragmatic necessity of living in a particular culture (Rorty 1982:166-169).

Rorty therefore avoids the charge of relativism by showing that one can be an ironist and hold true to the standards of their culture without necessarily investing their beliefs in the metaphysical notions that underpin it (Guignon and Riley 2003). Frazier defends the charge further by claiming Rorty does not intend our language can be made to look good or bad through Redescription: Full-stop. Only that it could be made to look good or bad to someone, somewhere. That Rorty's critics fail to see this suggests, to Frazier, they are still labouring under the notion of the meta-narrative, and that whatever Redescription is uttered by an ironist must be applicable to all people at all times (Frazier 2006).

5.7 Chapter Summary

Ironism, for Rorty, is the appropriate response to the disruption of practices brought about by the metaphysical corruption of our language over the last 25 centuries (Rorty 1989). The opposition he creates to explore this disruption is the difference between 'pure' and 'impure' philosophy of language. Impure language remains attached to the ideal, the transcendent and the universal, whilst pure language acknowledges the contingent, metaphorical nature of our linguistic conventions (Rorty 1979). Rorty could be seen as 'using' history for the purposes of narrative self-construction, his pragmatic hermeneutic treating history as no more than a tool in our present-day attempts to 'write ourselves thus' in a constant process of redescription (Gutting 1999). How we choose to adopt and modify our historical narrative in our redescription is simply a reflection of what we require ourselves to be in order to deal with the world as we find it (Bernstein 2003).

While Richard Rorty's work is widely discussed in philosophical circles, and there has been some application of his work in the field of International Relations,

little else in the way of practical application has been attempted (Malachowski 2002). This may be due in part to Rorty's own misgivings about the function of ironism in society, suggesting that "in our increasingly ironist culture, philosophy has become more important for the pursuit of private perfection rather than for any social task". He goes on to add "their [philosophers] work is ill-suited to public purposes" (1989:94-95). Rorty argues instead that the ironist should focus on the creative task of challenging our self-descriptions and sees, as an example, the function of the novelist as contributing to this task. Through an exposure to alternate narratives via the mechanism of the novel, we tend to confront our own stories, and ask ourselves whether adopting other descriptions could improve our situation (Rorty 1989).

My dissertation has argued that, like the novelist, the project manager can set themselves the task of challenging existing descriptions. Like the novelist, they can seek to expose the shortcomings of the languages we use and encourage different perspectives, not for the purposes of finding a description that is ultimately 'right', but rather for the purpose of creating a shared meaning that is viewed as improving the situation. The project manager, like the novelist, can create a temporary world, one that exists long enough to change it, but no more. Despite Rorty's concerns, my dissertation conceives of ironism and redescription as having a place in the public sphere, and that the concerns of the novelist are shared by the project manager.

Part II
A Virtuoso Competency Framework for Project Management
Practice

Introduction to Part II: Methodological Considerations

The methodological basis of the following chapters is the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as developed by Smith (2009). Cope (2011) notes that “a distinctive feature of IPA is a commitment to producing a fine grained interpretive account that is grounded in, and does justice to, each participant’s unique lived experience” (pp.608–609). IPA encourages the use of small sample sizes (generally 6–8) in selecting interview participants provided that “adequate contextualisation is preserved” (Cope 2011:608). Contextualisation is maintained by a pragmatic attitude toward participant selection, with participants chosen because of their particular relationship to the research question. In the case of this research, participants were chosen because of their relative level of experience (10 or more years) in the field of project management, which was seen as sufficient period of time to expose them to any shortcomings of their practice.

IPA is not prescriptive and allows for “individuality and flexibility of approach” that supports a loosely structured approach to data gathering. Interviews are typically structured around a single broad question, and the dialogue allowed to emerge from there (Cope 2011:608). The starting point of the interviews in this research was: “Can you tell me about a significant disruption you experienced in your practice as a project manager?” The specific method that the interviews follow from that point was outlined in Chapter 4 and encapsulated in Gendlin’s (1996) notion of the ‘felt sense’. Utilising the notion of the felt sense the participants were encouraged to express their experience of disruption in bodily terms, such as, “in their guts”, before moving on to name their experience in more theoretical, abstract ways.

An approach grounded in IPA recognises the difficulty in generalising from a small sample of data. Cope (2011) argues that such investigations “are capable of developing both new theoretical constructs and enhancing the potency of existing ones, bridging the gap between real-life occurrences and theoretical concepts” (p.610). The following chapters seek to establish the basis of virtuoso

project management competencies by relating the experiential themes that emerge from the interviews with broader theoretical frameworks. The outline of competencies that follow is developed under three broad themes that emerged from the research. Each theme is developed in a chapter that relates participants' experience to extant research and interprets their experience in light of that research. This is then followed by a discussion of the implications of the research for project management practice, education and training.

Chapter 6 – Attending to Project Management Practice

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter I use data from the phenomenological interviews to capture the lived experience of project managers and demonstrate how *attending* to project management practice is an essential aspect of achieving the level of a virtuoso practitioner. 'Attending' is a word I have employed to capture the skill of relating meaningfully to one's practice. I argue that a meaningful relationship to a practice is more than just an understanding of process and procedure; it implies an understanding of both the limitations and possibilities of the practice as well.

First, I demonstrate how a project manager must be *attuned* to the general operating conditions of project management. They must recognise that projects operate in conditions of disruption and that such conditions are the normal state of project management practice (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas and Hodgson 2006). Second, I show that project managers must nurture the skill of *reflecting* upon the different responses available to them in the face of such disruption. In doing so they must acknowledge that responses suitable to other, more stable practices, will not be suitable to project management (Segal 1999). Finally, I reveal how the virtuoso project manager must look beyond their practice in order to *recognise* the limitations of their own. In particular, they need to understand what distinguishes those practices from project management, and from each other.

6.2. An Attunement to the Practice of Project Management

Unlike the scientifically based model of project management practice critiqued in Part I, a practice based in philosophical hermeneutics does not treat disruptions to practice as deviations requiring correction, but rather takes them as a starting point for reflection and edification (Segal 2004). This section shows how an attunement to such disruptions is a necessary starting point

within an overall virtuoso competency of attending to practice. It demonstrates how treating disruption to existing project management practice as an opportunity for an existential questioning of the practice offers opportunities not available to the scientific model of project management.

In the following section I show how Peter provides us with an example of a project management practitioner in the space of such existential questioning. A 32-year-old project manager from Perth, Peter had been engaged by his IT consulting firm to manage a large application development program for the client in Sydney. Despite the time away from his family and the extended commute (Sydney and Perth being on the opposite sides of Australia) he had taken the offer because of the challenge and opportunities it afforded him. It was, as he recalls, "*his dream project*".

After some initial success on his new project, Peter began to encounter problems with the vendor providing the majority of the software services. The services were provided off-shore and the logistics and communications difficulties of managing an international supplier were beginning to generate multiple delays. As Peter recounts:

It got to the point where no matter what I did, what changes I made to the schedule or to the delivery structure, I couldn't keep us on track. The steering committee was starting to panic. I had everything in place, I felt like I was doing everything right but everything kept going wrong. It was frustrating because up to then I had considered myself a pretty good project manager.

In Kuhn's terms, the anomaly that throws the theory of project management into question is Peter's belief that he was doing everything right; yet everything was going wrong. It is this kind of contradiction which, for Kuhn, throws a paradigm into question (Kuhn 1996). However, Peter did not initially question the paradigm. One can see that Peter's professional identity as a project

manager is already beginning to suffer. His observation that “I *had* considered myself a pretty good project manager” infers that his inability to immediately correct the deviations that were occurring meant he could no longer consider himself a good project manager.

In Heideggerian terms, the disturbances were calling Peter’s being as a project manager into question (Heidegger 1996). Such a stance is typical of formal project management, which sees the correction of deviations as the basis of good project management practice (Hartley 2009). At this stage, Peter has not yet come to question the assumption regarding deviations. Instead of it being questioned, he is questioning himself as a project manager. Thus it is still against the taken for granted background against which he is questioning himself (Heidegger 1993).

Philosophical hermeneutics views disruptions such as the one Peter is experiencing as an entry point to an improved understanding of their practice. With sufficient attunement, the disruption experienced by practitioners in their work can serve to make explicit the practices by which they operate (Segal 1999). Watson (1994a) observes that, during periods of relative stability, when well-worn practices produce well-worn results, there is rarely the need for such an examination of our practices. When a crisis occurs, however, it can precipitate the kind of introspection that brings such practices sharply into focus (Flores 2000).

In order to enter the realm of hermeneutic questioning, Peter needs to switch from questioning himself in terms of the background assumptions of project management and question the background assumptions of project management itself:

I started to question everything. It was like every principle I had learned in courses or at university was now suspect.

Peter is now shifting from questioning himself to questioning the assumptions that underpin project management. This can be conceptualised as a shift from

a psychological form of questioning (which focuses on self-worth) to a philosophical form of questioning which focuses on the lived experience of the assumptions underpinning the practice of project management (Segal 2006). This shift allows Peter to move beyond acceptance of the methods at his disposal, to a more fundamental form of questioning:

If I was applying these things properly and they weren't working, why the hell was I still using them?

As practitioners, the tools we use serve to define the purpose of our practices, and their failure can be overwhelming to our professional identity as practitioners (Segal 2004). It is important in the context of project management practice that Heidegger does not restrict the use of the term 'tool' to physical objects. Language is a tool, and sophisticated human practices, such as project management, use the tool of language to effect changes in the environment around them. When Peter uses tools to perform his work as a project manager, he does so in an intimate way that sees the tools bound up in the purpose of his efforts. Heidegger (1996) shows us that when the meaning of everyday activities is questioned, it is both the usability of tools that is called into question, and the purpose of those tools. Or, as Segal (1999) puts it, when engaged in work there is rarely a focus on the meaning of work but when that work is seriously threatened or disrupted there can become an acute awareness of what work means.

In Peter's case, his feelings of being overwhelmed reached a professional point of crisis when, after 18 months of effort on his project, he was removed from the project by his firm and replaced:

I remember being gutted, completely gutted, you know it was like I had a hole in the middle of me somewhere. You know, if I'd been caught with my hand in the till.

There are at least three dimensions in Peter's observation that are worth bringing out from an existential hermeneutic perspective. The experience of a "hole in the middle of me somewhere" can be understood as a metaphor for existential anxiety. Existential anxiety, as Heidegger maintains, occurs when a person experiences that they have no ground upon which to stand; no-where to turn (Heidegger 1996:233). Such an experience can be accompanied by a sense of emptiness, or what Heidegger calls the anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness (Heidegger 1993). Peter's notion of being "gutted" reinforces this sense of having no ground upon which to stand and thus being in the state of existential anxiety.

Peter's expression "caught with my hand in the till" at first glance seems an unusual reaction to the situation. Whilst it could be argued he was responsible for the failure of the project to deliver its objectives, "hand in the till" implies a moral failing as well. This seems to denote a sense of guilt, not just about the failure of the project (and as noted in Part I, projects fail the majority of the time) but also about his failure as a practitioner. He is unable to divorce the project itself from the practice of project management and has risked his professional identity as a result (Oakley and Cocking 2001).

In Heideggerian terms, it was the failure of Peter's tools that made his practices explicit to him. Heidegger's logic, as expressed in *Being and Time* (1996), is that it is in the breakdown of a practice that the taken-for-granted background of a practice becomes explicit. Koestenbaum (1978) phrases this as: "Anxiety is ... the act of reflection itself" (p.222). Anxiety is therefore the existential basis for questioning. In anxiety we question because our being is in question. And what we question is our way of being. As Heidegger puts it, in anxiety being-in-the-world comes face to face with being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1996). Or in the terms in which this dissertation is being written, in anxiety the background ways of being and assumptions of our practice become explicit in moments of anxiety.

The nature of this explicitness is not that of a well-framed question that requires only a suitable logical analysis to produce a result. Instead, it is an

explicitness shrouded in anxiety, an anxiety produced when one is not even sure the questions being asked are the right ones, or whether there is even a way of forming a question that would make sense (Segal 1999). The difficulty we have in articulating such questions to ourselves is because “that in the face of which one has anxiety is characterised by the fact that what threatens is *nowhere* ... it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath, and yet it is nowhere” (Heidegger 1996:231).

Gendlin (1996) sheds a revealing light on the phenomenon of articulating questioning in anxiety by noting that, when we first begin to question ourselves in a fundamental way, we frequently enunciate our feelings in visceral, bodily terms. The depth of our anxiety can often evade our attempts to articulate it in a rational way so we rely, instead, on the effect of the anxiety on our body. As Peter put it, he was “completely gutted”, and it was “like I had a hole in the middle of me”. By putting words to those bodily sensations, and by refusing to allow them to pass by without reflection, Peter opens up the opportunity to carry his questioning further and to explore the significance of his anxiety for his practice.

Segal (1999) assists us in this by asking: “At what point in our practices do we decide to examine our practices?” (p.74). Whilst it is generally understood that insight into one’s own practices can increase our effectiveness in those practices (Mintzberg 1975), it is less understood how that insight is to be achieved. Segal (1999) argues that existential disruptions to our practices are *necessary* in order to make them explicit, and that without them we remain embedded in what Heidegger calls our ‘average everyday’ way of doing things. We ‘intuit’, but do not typically acknowledge the fundamental paradigms, axioms and premises that guide the way we do things in *our average everydayness* (Heidegger 1996).

It is only when our everyday way of doing things no longer produces the outcomes we envisage that we are suddenly confronted by our practices in their explicitness (Segal 1999). For project managers, like Peter, such moments

of explicitness can represent a challenge to the paradigm of the practice itself (Watson 1994a). It is within this kind of disruption that a project manager is offered the opportunity to “develop an explicit appreciation of their paradigm and practice” (Segal 1999:78). As Peter found in the aftermath of his removal from the project he was working on:

There was a fair bit of disgust there as well with the way things had panned out. But a lot of confusion, I guess, on my part. I'd done everything I thought correctly and now it had just all gone belly up, fallen in a big hole.

The confusion between having “done everything ... correctly” and “going belly up” is precisely the basis for existential questioning. The more Peter allows himself to dwell in this contradiction, the more it enables him to raise the question of the way of being of his practice.

This point is well developed by Spinoza and Flores in applying the logic of Heidegger to managerial work through the lived experience of Flores. As a manager with a formal role description, Flores was mandated with certain tasks. However, rather than completing the mandated tasks, he found that he spent most of his day talking to other people (Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus 1997). Rather than trying to eliminate one side of the contradiction (that is either perform tasks or talk to others), Flores learnt to dwell in the contradiction and observe himself. As he did so, it dawned on him that *conversation itself* is at the heart of management and is not simply a marginal aspect of it. He suggests that it ought to be included in the role description of managers and managers need to develop the competencies of what he came to call effective “conversations for action” (Spinoza, Flores and Dreyfus 1997).

The experiences of Peter and Fernando Flores highlight the importance of disruption in revealing our practices to ourselves. They also demonstrate the different reactions individuals can take to such disruptions, a point taken up in the following sections.

At this point in the development of virtuoso competency, Peter has not yet moved to the state of dwelling in the contradiction outlined by Spinoza and Flores. Peter is trapped within what Lindgren and Packendorff (2006) (quoting Foucault) refer to as the “prison” (p.116) of the project, one that allows him to remain highly committed to the objectives of the scientific project management paradigm and utilise all the tools and procedures that are a constituent part of it, and yet not see himself as a prisoner:

It was weird but right up to the end [of his tenure on the project] I was still completely on board with the way we were doing things. I felt so bad because I thought it was me not doing those things well enough. It never occurred to me I was doing the wrong things...

It is clear at this stage that Peter does not think that the tools of the scientific project management paradigm to which he was committed are actually a significant part of the problem. However, once having acknowledged the contradiction between the taken-for-granted assumptions about project management and his own practice of it, Peter is now in a position to begin questioning the context of the project management practice itself.

Segal considers that “a disturbance or rupture transforms our attunement from a concern with objects in a context to the context in which things are situated. Rupture is the generative condition of an attunement which is turned back on its own way of being attuned to the world” (Segal 1999:85). Until this stage, Peter has considered the scientific method of his practice *as* his practice. It is only when, through both contradiction and disruption, he begins to realise the method fails to perform its function and no longer delivers the results expected, that there is an attunement to the method *as* a method (Heidegger 1996).

What is made explicit by Peter is not something that can be defined within the existing framework of project management practice, for the very meaning of the terms used to frame that definition are now being challenged (Kuhn 1996).

The “habituated terms of reference” that Peter uses on a day-to-day basis can no longer be relied on because he is entering “a space of inarticulateness” (Segal 1999:78). As Peter expresses it:

I was afraid the satisfaction that I got out of doing the job was never going to come back after that, that it was always going to be tainted a bit by something that I really couldn't quite grasp and understand. And I was always going to be a bit afraid that it was going to happen again.

Despite the anguish Peter’s situation has caused him, his attunement to the disruption of his practice and his desire to stay within it, rather than abandon his practice to the anxiety his disruption had caused him, have now put him in the space of questioning his practices. Though not yet able to articulate his questioning, he recognises the “prison” that his existing practices have become for him. As Peter puts it, “it never occurred to me that I was doing the wrong things”.

Peter’s attunement to his practice is an initial step in the development of virtuoso competencies. The next section further develops the competency of attending to practice by examining the different ways in which project managers can reflect on what has been revealed to them through disruption to their practices. This section builds on the aspect of attunement just outlined by showing that different kinds of reflection on disruption lead to different kinds of responses. Understanding the differences between these responses is an important stage in developing virtuoso project management competencies.

6.3 Reflecting on Project Management Practice

There is, as Segal observes, an “inarticulate space” (1999:78) between the old world and the new. The case of Peter in the previous section highlighted the competency of attunement and concern towards practice that led, paradoxically, to this space of inarticulateness. It was Peter’s attunement to his practice that made his role as a project manager explicit and, in doing so, rendered unstable the terms he used to describe his average, everyday way of

doing things. As a result, Peter does not yet have the terms to articulate the new situation he has encountered.

The space of inarticulateness of which Segal speaks is a critical juncture through which a project manager must pass before they can take advantage of the explicitness (Segal 1999). This juncture is represented by the different kinds of response to the disruption the practitioner can take. A simple attunement to disruption is not in itself sufficient to garner new insight into their practice; a virtuoso project management practitioner must make a conscious decision to sufficiently reflect upon the disruption lest they fall back into familiar ways of doing things (Crawford, Morris, Thomas and Winter 2006).

There are a number of aspects the virtuoso project practitioner needs to develop within the competency of reflection. The first is an attitude to disruption that serves to reveal rather than conceal the potential for new descriptions and opportunities (Segal 1999). Second, the practitioner must cultivate reflective practices that recognise the danger of attempting to describe abnormal states of practice in normal terms (Rorty 1979). Such an approach serves only to idealise existing states of knowledge and preserve the status quo (Kuhn 1996). Lastly, the virtuoso practitioner must try to see beyond the boundaries of their practice and seek to enhance and extend it through interaction with other practices.

Drawing on Heidegger, Segal (1999) shows that practitioners can draw on two kinds of response in the way they deal with disruption to their practices: the reflective kind or the defensive kind. Whilst each is a response to an inability to fully articulate what we have found, the form of each response is radically different. In Flores's terms, one seeks to reveal (or 'disclose') new worlds while the other is concerned with concealing them (Flores 2000).

The more dominant response, Segal (1999) maintains, is that of concealing. Concealing, Segal argues, is typified by an attitude of defensiveness. Defensiveness is a response to disruption that fails to acknowledge that which has been made explicit. Rather than dealing with the explicitness and what it

might have revealed, the practitioner falls back on familiar ways of doing things. Peter provides an example of this in his own response to disruption:

The next project I took, the one after that, I deliberately took a smaller one, I think, where they are working for a customer directly again, not doing the contract or consulting thing because ... and it wasn't a government department either, it was private enterprise. I was now basically ... my reaction, I guess, was to try and avoid a situation in which that sort of thing could transpire again. Which probably, you know, wasn't the most courageous thing, but I couldn't see any way of getting satisfaction out of the job if those sorts of things could happen.

Peter's response to the disruption by which he was confronted does not take on the form of reflection, but can be more easily characterised as a form of defensiveness that Segal (1999:87) calls "avoidance". In his own words Peter wanted to "try and avoid a situation in which that sort of thing could transpire again." "That sort of thing" is exactly that aspect of Peter's practice that has been made explicit to him. Peter's attitude of avoidance means that whilst the everyday practices of the project manager have been made explicit to him through disruption, that disruption has failed to transform the explicitness into a questioning. Segal (1999) notes that:

Defensive forms of explicitness involve a tension or contradiction, for they involve making something that was habitually taken for granted explicit, but they fail to question that which was made explicit. By idealisation of that which has been made explicit, they conceal that which is taken for granted in the idealised. They are thus caught in a tension between *revealing* and *concealing*. (p.87) [my italics]

Though Peter initially questioned that which had been made explicit to him, his defensive response to the disruption sees him idealise project management practice and effectively conceal that which had been uncovered:

Eventually I thought, well, there's nothing I could have done about it you know? Maybe on these smaller projects I could actually apply the principles I had learned and get them right.

The comfort of idealisation, Segal (1999) argues, is that it invokes 'natural forces' against which anyone is helpless to do other than continue on their current course until the wave has passed. Peter's idealisation is similar, arguing the situation in which he found himself was unavoidable ("there was nothing I could have done about it"), except perhaps for an improvement in the application of the project management principles that he had learned (Crawford, Morris, Thomas and Winter 2006). This suggests that he is still blaming himself. The implication of this position is that it was Peter's failure to apply the tools and techniques of existing project management practice to the situation correctly that led to his failure, rather than the application of the *wrong* techniques. In such a fashion, Peter idealises the corpus of project management knowledge whilst making himself complicit as a practitioner in the incorrect application of it (Rolfe 2011). Peter goes on to observe:

The gut-wrenching part was I felt I had let myself down. I'd been given everything I needed to do the job and it looked so simple on paper. The steering committee couldn't understand why we weren't staying on schedule and I struggled to make clear, in the context of the schedule I guess, why we couldn't keep to it.

What this makes clear is that Peter was not alone in idealising the methods of project management practice. The steering committee to which he reported had also idealised the methods of the project to the point where the schedule, an abstract representation on paper, now corresponded to the project itself. This kind of idealisation highlights a commitment to the status quo and the maintenance of existing, normal standards of practice (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b). The next section demonstrates that such commitments become problematic in the face of significant disruptions to practice.

As outlined in Part I, *normal* practice occurs within a certain paradigm of understanding in which the standards of evaluation (and therefore reason) are already known. To examine a practice from within the paradigm of a particular practice is to submit to the initial conditions or axioms from which that practice generated its entire discourse (Kuhn 1996). In normal practice, Rorty (1979) argues, “everybody agrees on how to evaluate everything everybody else says” because there is an “agreed upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, or what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it” (p.320).

The agreed-upon convention for the evaluation of Peter’s project by his steering committee was the formal project management method, of which the project management schedule (the Gantt chart) was an integral part (Howell, Macomber, Koskela and Draper 2004). In maintaining their commitment to an abstract schedule (despite what the reality of the situation was telling them) the steering committee were idealising the set of conventions that provided them with what they considered a ‘good argument’ for what was going wrong with the project. As Peter makes clear, though, in the space of the crisis brought about by disruptions to existing practices, what counts as a ‘good argument’ can often be no longer clear:

So I can understand, I can really understand how project managers fall easily into the trap of focusing on trying to find out what it is that the steering committee wants to see, showing that to them and then doing their very best to cover their arse in other ways. To be honest, in that situation, I probably would have been better off spending a lot more time looking at the schedule, less time managing the project.

What Peter is beginning to bring out here is a tension between the idealised or representational and rational view of project management and the lived experience of the politics of project management in which stakeholders are trying to “cover their arse”. The problem Peter alludes to is the attempt to describe what is an abnormal state of affairs in the normal terms of project

management practice (Rorty 1979). 'Covering one's own arse' is not a normal term of the formal discourse of project management. As has already been mentioned, project management is a representational and rational discourse that has no place for such expressions and the importance they have for both practice and the relationship between the rational language of project management and the day-to-day practice of it.

As Rorty points out, normal practice applies when the terms of the practice are capable of dealing with the problem at hand. Where such terms are no longer capable of articulating the problem, abnormal practice is required (Rorty 1979). It is clear, however, that Peter and his steering committee are still struggling to come to terms with this:

We spent more and more time in the steering committee looking at the schedule, going through it line by line. I spent more and more time preparing it. It was the only thing that mattered.

In times of abnormal practice, what is in question are the fundamental axioms of the practice that would serve to underpin the structure of any rationale argument (Rorty 1989). The common ground in any rationale debate has disappeared because the framework within which things are understood is changing to something not yet understood (Segal 1999). In such circumstances, when the actual premises that form the basis of our rational framework are challenged, examining our practices by using existing premises, in the manner that Peter and his steering committee are doing, is, Rorty maintains, literally nonsensical (Rorty 1979).

When practices are disrupted, what is actually sensible or non-sensible is up for debate, and when such debates occur the practice has now entered a period of "abnormal" practice (Rorty 1979:315-322). For Peter, it was only after he had left the project that this realisation began to emerge:

I thought about leaving project management altogether, I thought I didn't have what it took, but after a while I started wondering if maybe I

just needed to look at things differently, maybe just not accept the one way of doing things I had been taught.

The “one of way” of doing things to which Peter refers is the familiar state of normal practice that he and his steering committee had been engaged in during the course of his project. As outlined in the genealogy in Part I, this one way has tended to be defined in contemporary project management practice by the procedural methods outlined in the PMBoK (PMI 2013) and other similar definitions of practice. By initially idealising this state as the only way of approaching project management practice, Peter had rejected the abnormality of his situation and retreated into the familiar terms of his practice (Segal 1999). However, his comment that “maybe I just need to look at things differently” reveals that he is now in a position to acknowledge what Rorty (1979) describes as the “unfamiliar” terms offered by other practices.

Rorty (1979) clarifies the distinction between familiar and unfamiliar by observing that “science studies nature or the familiar whilst hermeneutics studies the spirit or unfamiliar” (p.353). The unfamiliar serves to challenge our existing practices by showing us how such practices are only one possible form among a variety available to us. The purpose of exposing ourselves to other practices is what Rorty calls “edification” through an attunement to the phenomena of the unfamiliar, rather than the idealisation of the familiar, as it is in normal practice (Rorty 1979:357-365).

Peter’s example begins to highlight this process of edification when, following his removal and reassignment to another project, he starts to consider the nature of the practice in which he was participating:

It [the application development project] had really shaken me up. It had challenged what I thought a project was and what it was I was doing. After I got over all the bitterness, all that well ... crap, I began to look at project management in an entirely new way. I paid a lot more attention

to the way projects got handled in different sectors and I was really surprised how different some of them could actually be. It got me thinking about the stuff I took for granted every day and about how I might change that.

By examining the way in which “projects got handled in other sectors”, Peter has entered the state of the unfamiliar. This allows him to become more sensitive to his own way of practicing project management. As highlighted by Peter’s experience, when practitioners find themselves operating in the space of abnormal activity, one in which their “average everyday way of being” has been disrupted, the practices themselves are made explicit (Heidegger 1993:79). This means the practitioner is now sensitive to his or her own way of practising and, no longer absorbed in the routine way of doing things, is able to consider the terms of other practices (Segal 1999). This process should not be mistaken for the simple appropriation of tools from other practices. In the sense used by Rorty, utilising the unfamiliar means using terms from other practices to render the fundamental terms of the existing practice unstable. The aim is not just to approach the problems of the practice differently, but to use the approach of other practices to change the framework within which the problem is defined in the first place (Rorty 1979).

In periods of normal activity, when a practice is dealing with familiar problems that present themselves in a consistent fashion, the existing terms of practice will generally yield results. As outlined in earlier chapters, the progress made in the natural sciences over the centuries is testament to this. In periods of abnormal activity such as those encountered by Peter, when the familiar terms of practice no longer yield the usual results, what is needed, Rorty (1979) argues, is hermeneutics. It is an important point that hermeneutics does not set itself up as an alternative to objective inquiry, but simply denies the familiar a privileged place in our practices (Rorty 1979). As Peter notes:

I knew I couldn't keep doing the same old thing the same old way anymore. It wasn't as though it was all rubbish though. I could just see

how limited project management was the way we were taught in our courses and the way we tried to get it done. It wasn't the be all and end all like we supposed but just the real basics. I think it's because everyone is just so used to it now that the idea of managing a project a different way is kind of heretical. You're a genius if it works but god help you if you stuff it up!

Peter's observation that existing procedural project management methods were not "all rubbish" but "just the real basics" highlights the point made in the Introduction to Part II around levels of competency. Procedural methods as described in the PMBoK (PMI 2013) are not replaced by hermeneutics. As Rorty notes, hermeneutics should not be seen as a "successor discipline" to other forms of enquiry but as a supplement to them. Hermeneutics is, as Rorty puts it, "a discourse about the other discourses" (Rorty 1979:321).

The implication of ascending levels of competency is that the familiar terms of existing formal project management practice serve as the basis of practical knowledge. It is on this foundation of basic knowledge that novice practitioners can ultimately develop more nuanced techniques. Virtuoso levels of project management competency cannot be obtained by 'skipping' lower levels of competency, any more than a composer can write a symphony without first learning chords (Berkun 2005). It is the mastery of the basics of project management that allows the beginner project manager to participate in the practice, and it is moving beyond those basics that ultimately allows the virtuoso practitioner to deliver far more complex and varied pieces of work (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006c).

Philosophical hermeneutics provides the project practitioner with a tool that avoids a defensive and idealised way of doing things, by allowing them to adopt a reflective response that accepts the possibilities inherent in unfamiliar practices (Rorty 1979). It is through the unfamiliar terms of those practices that existing ways of working and thinking about work can be challenged, and the

“limited project management” method of which Peter speaks can be extended and enhanced.

Dealing with the unfamiliar terms of other practices challenges the project manager to develop virtuoso skills. Such skills involve reflecting on the shortcomings of the familiar terms of their own practice and then engaging meaningfully with the language-games that constitute other specialist practices. The following section explores the notion of specialist language-games and the role they play in the development of virtuoso competency.

6.4 Recognising the “Language Games”

Developing a virtuoso competency requires a project manager to recognise that the various practices within a company constitute what Rorty describes as a “language game” (1982:166-169). Practices are a language-game by virtue of the fact that the terms contained within them mean what they mean by the consensus of the practitioners, rather than by any correspondence of those terms to something transcendental. In other words, there are no referents outside of a practice (i.e. the “game”) to which the terms of a practice correspond. The terms of a practice achieve their meaning through reference to each other, and if removed from the context of the practice may change their meaning, or be lost entirely. This applies to all the terms in the practice, regardless of how fundamental they are to its constitution (Rorty 1989).

This section proceeds by arguing that to successfully recognise organisational language-games, a virtuoso project manager must cultivate an attitude of what Rorty calls “ironism” (1989:73). An ironist is someone who recognises that the various languages we use in our day-to-day practices are a game. An ironist sees that our values, beliefs and ways of doing things are not rooted in nature itself but are conventions shaped by the history of a practice. The history of our practices determines what terms are used within them, and what terms have fallen by the wayside over the course of time. It is therefore the history of our

practices that determines our present ways of understanding our work (Rorty 1989).

The genealogy in Part I demonstrated an ironic stance towards the terms of project management practice, arguing the scientific terminology adopted by the project management community in the 1950s and 1960s was the result of social and cultural influences rather than any conformance of those terms to something universal and eternal (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b). The attitude of the ironist reflected in that enquiry can be contrasted with those of us who feel the terms in which our work practices are inscribed are not a “game”, but do indeed correspond with something eternal and immutable. For these people, Rorty argues, the language of their practice is a “final vocabulary”, the terms of which cannot be argued about, and their meaning not debated (Rorty 1989:73).

In making this contrast, there is no wish to disparage those of us for whom our language terms, and thus our beliefs, are somehow transcendental. For, as Rorty points out, this is nearly all of us. The perfect ironist is as difficult to find as the perfect fundamentalist (Rorty 1999). We all have some terms in our language we are willing to debate and others we are not. Ironism, therefore, is a question of degree (Rorty 1989). How far are we prepared to go, Rorty asks, in challenging the existing terms of our language?

This section argues a virtuoso project management practitioner needs to go further than most. Projects (especially large ones) can be inherently destabilising to the organisations that create them. In fact, this is often a necessary condition for the changes that a project is charged with implementing (Thomsett 2002). In such a time of organisational instability, the project manager needs to be cognisant there are a multitude of language games clamouring for dominance within the organisation, none of which can yet lay claim to it (Bresnen 2006). In these circumstances the project will become a vehicle for the realisation of one or more competing organisational narratives. Negotiating these multiple competing languages is a critical

competency for the virtuoso project practitioner and one that the philosophical tool of ironism can assist in facilitating.

Rorty maintains that adopting a philosophical stance of ironism gives us the opportunity to see languages for what they are. That is, as tools for getting what we want. As such they are not endowed with any transcendental properties that make them applicable for all kinds of problems at all times. Languages evolve over time as the kinds of problems we face evolve. An ironist recognises this, but also recognises there are languages that do not change and that do lay claim to being applicable in all situations at all times. Rorty describes these kinds of languages as “meta-languages” and they represent a particular challenge to the growth of human practices (Rorty 1989:122).

This section casts the existing, formal project management method as a meta-language. The purpose of the project management meta-language, in this context, is to provide an over-arching frame of reference for all problems within the organisation. As such, the meta-language attempts to subsume all other specialist languages into it. The development of a virtuoso competency has been made extremely difficult by the existing formal project management meta-language, which seeks to ignore ambiguity of meaning between practices by imposing a language-game of its own (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b).

The approach of the meta-language, in the form of the formal project management method, are contrasted with the example of virtuoso practitioners, who, through an attunement to disruption and a reflective, non-defensive attitude, are able to recognise that attempting to marginalise other specialist languages more often than not leads to disharmony and failure (Ivory, Alderman, McLoughlin and Vaughan 2006). Instead, an ironic disposition to language allows the virtuoso project manager to recognise the necessity of the multiple language-games in operation and work at the intersections between them. One of the critical competencies of the virtuoso project manager is to

recognise the ambiguity of meanings brought about by the multiple specialist languages in operation in any large, contemporary organisation (Ackroyd 1994).

As Linehan and Kavanagh (2006) observe, the concept of project management as a universalised practice able to transcend countries, cultures, organisations and departments is very powerful. They believe that one of the reasons why the scientific project management meta-language has “flourished” is because of the “‘silo’ mentality in organisations wherein there are perceived communications barriers between departments or functional units” (p.x). Individual business units are, they argue, “isomorphic” with their own “distinct languages – hence we have a sales language, a production language, an accounting language and so on” (p.56). They note that “project management has been proffered as a potent integrating mechanism to counter the (linguistic) fragmentation that is rampant in the contemporary organisational setting” (p.56). What Linehan and Kavanah find most ironic in this solution is that it seeks to impose “yet another language into the mix – namely the language of project management, with its vocabulary of bar charts, resource histograms, work breakdown structure, project lifecycle balanced matrix, project risk analysis, critical path method and so on” (Linehan and Kavanagh 2006:56).

For the project manager charged with the responsibility of delivering the aims of the project, the universal language of formal project management is meant to provide an over-arching framework within which the terms of control can be established, and the corresponding terms of success and failure can be attributed (Smith 2006). For the project team members assigned from their various core disciplines to the “virtual and semi-permanent structure of the project”, the language of formal project management is meant to provide “a single coherent framework” within which all the terms previously deployed in different areas can now be rendered commensurable with one another (Ivory, Alderman, McLoughlin and Vaughan 2006:331).

To highlight the dominance of the project management meta-language in the contemporary corporate environment, we return to Peter and his reflections on his own 'failed' project:

And just showing them as accurately as possible how the project was ... how it was failing and making them happy, 'cause they would have been happier that way 'cause they would have understood what was going on. As I said, they asked me to move on not because the project was going that badly but because they didn't think I was adding the necessary value because I didn't understand what was happening in my own project.

Peter felt he was moved on "not because the project was going that badly" but because "I didn't understand what was happening in my own project". One explanation for the steering committee's concern is provided by Smith, who argues that existing formal project management practice assumes that without a universal meta-language there can be no control and therefore no clear attribution of success or failure (Smith 2006). This fits with the Peter's impression about the reasons for his firing, which were not because the project was failing (and, as he points out, it was not going badly) but because the steering committee did not feel they had "control".

The notion of the 'universal meta-language' and the control it is perceived to provide is the founding principle of project management practice and, this dissertation has consistently argued, its principal weakness. As the genealogy in Part I established, the concept of the universal project management meta-language has its foundation in the rational framework of the natural sciences. The perceived success of the natural sciences in the centuries since the scientific method became popular has seen the word 'scientific' become analogous to 'truth' and any practice derived from scientific principles as sharing in this truthfulness (Rorty 1979).

An atypical attitude is that of Gribbin (2002) ,who, in his introduction to *Science: A History*, says "...science is one of the greatest achievements

(arguably *the* greatest achievement) of the human mind” (p.xxii). As Rorty (1979) argues, from this perspective, applying the scientific method faithfully to a problem is to approach, as closely as possible, how things ‘really’ are.

Flyvbjerg (2001) supports this view by pointing out that it is the supposedly objective capacity of the natural sciences that has been the hallmark of their success. Whilst this has led to the emulation of their basic principles into a far wider variety of fields than the core natural disciplines such as physics, chemistry or biology, it has been in its application to the human or social ‘sciences’, such as project management, that has been most problematic (Flyvbjerg 2001). Peter provides an insight into why this might be when he states:

There was this understanding that whatever was on the [project] schedule was the way things had to be. Every slippage had to be explained and if there wasn't an adequate explanation it was 'cause there wasn't enough detail in the schedule or we hadn't provided enough detail in the supporting documentation or some such thing. We never seemed to talk about the project, just the tonnes and tonnes of documents we had produced that described the project. It seemed to be one step removed from reality.

The problem Peter describes here is the inability of a method based on the natural sciences to properly articulate the situations with which the project manager is faced. Tellingly, he notes that they “never seemed to talk about the project” but instead just accumulated vast amounts of “detail” in order to “describe” it. Commenting on what he considers the inability of the social sciences to deal with actual social issues, Saul (1997) asks, rhetorically, why the social sciences continue to try to emulate the methods of the natural sciences:

Why? Because they labour still under the burden of being false sciences. Their experiments do not provide any measurable progress in the manner of a real science. In place of real evidence they are obliged to pile up overwhelming weights of documentation relating to human action

– none of which is proof, little of it even illustration. This sort of material carries the force of neither history nor creativity. What they are working with is circumstantial evidence. It is meant to create the impression of evidence by the force of weight. (pp.71–72)

It is this “force of weight” that is crushing Peter. The burden of being a “false science” has created a situation in which project managers such as Peter struggle to implement the formal tools of their practice in real-world situations (Flyvbjerg 2001). The formal project management method demands an immense amount of detail about the project in the hope that such detail will provide control. When it fails to do so the meta-language provides no alternative way of describing the situation.

A virtuoso project manager requires a highly critical and nuanced understanding of the meta-language that constitutes existing project management practice. An appreciation of the manner in which the project management meta-language is deployed and the purposes to which it is put are essential for ensuring that project managers do not become trapped within an artificially contrived science experiment of their own making (Flyvbjerg 2001). Peter provides us a clear example of the dangers of the project management meta-language, and the importance of understanding it for the virtuoso practitioner. Ultimately, in terms of the development of Peter’s own virtuoso competency, he was (at the time of the interview) still attempting to transcend the limitations of that language.

Accordingly, the following section turns to two different project managers, Alan and Jane, as each move beyond the confines of the project management meta-language and begin to explore the hermeneutic aspects of their practice.

Alan, a 37-year-old project manager from Melbourne, provides our first example. Alan had responsibility for running a large IT and change management project for a US-based pharmaceutical company in Sydney. The project involved the rollout of a series of new technologies, aimed at

standardising organisational work practices and ultimately finding ways to reduce employee overheads through improved productivity and staff reductions. As the rollouts progressed there was also considerable pressure to reduce staff numbers on the project itself. As a result, Alan began to notice a change in the utilisation of language in his project.

The meetings I was having with some of the managers were really odd. More and more we began speaking of the employees as a 'resource unit', reducing them to a number. So eventually it wasn't Tarryn or Sam anymore, but a Band 7 Business Analyst with specific cost overhead.

Alan's observation draws attention to a dissonance between the language of formal project management and other specialist languages in use in the organisation. The formal language of project management deals with individual human beings as "resource units" in order to be able to allocate and track their effort in a measurable way. At first, Alan saw this way of describing people as quite useful:

At first I hated it [referring to people in that way], but gradually I came to realise that it was the only way to do the job. To look at each person as an individual before deciding whether they had a part to play in the company seemed like the obvious thing to do, but was also unbearable as you knew most of them had to go. I learned that the language we were using was a sort of defence against the, sort of, ... I guess, miserable part of what we were doing.

The dissonance Alan and his colleagues were experiencing was generated by the inability of the specialist language they were using (i.e. formal project management) to encapsulate what was actually happening (Flyvbjerg 2001). No matter how useful it may have appeared at first, ultimately the language of their practice provided Alan and his team with an ineffective means of dealing with "the miserable part of what we were doing".

The problem Alan was experiencing is caused by the fact that the scientific language on which formal project management is based uses individual terms to refer externally to physical objects, and it is that reference which is assumed to provide science with its objectivity. In order for the language of science to operate successfully, all aspects of the environment need to be reduced to quantifiable, measurable natural objects, or scientific language has no basis on which to operate (Chalmers 1976). Alan and his colleagues are experiencing the limitations of the formal project management language in that the meaning of what they are doing has individual human beings as the external referents rather than inanimate objects. The misery of being involved in the retrenchment of their fellow human beings could not be encapsulated in the terms of the formal language-game they were using.

For language-games other than the natural sciences, the dispute has been whether any of the terms they deploy can refer externally, or whether our languages are entirely self-referential (Rorty 1979). Rorty sees that we, as human beings, have a deep-seated desire to view the “noises and marks” that constitute our verbal and non-verbal communications as being “at one” with the world around us (Rorty 1989:37). Alan captures this idea in his description of the resource-levelling activity in his project:

Eventually we came to see our resource-levelling chart as the way the company actually was. We saw the peaks and troughs of resource utilisation as a challenge to the natural order of things or something. We had to flatten them out, make it clean and orderly so the company would be orderly.

Alan’s initial view of the resource-levelling chart as “the way the company actually was” is an example of a “final vocabulary”, a term of Rorty’s introduced earlier in the chapter. A final vocabulary implies a set of descriptions that couldn’t be interpreted any other way, as we believe they correspond to reality. That the resource-levelling chart did not, ultimately, correspond to reality represented a “challenge to the natural order of things” that proved difficult for

Alan's team to assimilate. Rorty (1979) argues that, most of the time, when we talk or write about something we think we are talking or writing about the world 'as it is' and, given enough time, we could describe anything with such detail that further description would be redundant and a *different* description would be impossible. Rorty claims that this is simply an idea, one our society did not always have, and one we can do without. He argues that we should abandon our propensity for adopting languages heavily invested in notions of truth, and adopt languages invested in notions of what *works* (Rorty 1979). Alan demonstrates his own virtuoso competency in this regard when he eventually manages to move himself and his team beyond the final vocabulary of the resource model:

The problem with all our resource levelling is that it was fine on paper but it didn't actually function properly when we applied it. No matter what we put together, reality seemed to intrude and disrupt it. Eventually we had to abandon the detailed forward resource-planning model for a ready reaction scheme where we just kept the same resource load level for a year and reviewed their allocation weekly. We just stayed in touch with the line managers, talked to them about their staff, understood their skills and when someone left, or went on maternity leave or a project finished, we knew about it. We could move people into those roles. Strangely, when we looked at our resource level model retrospectively, it was nearly flat. We'd achieved what we wanted [i.e. a level resource base] by paying less direct attention to it.

Alan's decision to set aside (in this particular instance) the formal project management meta-language in which he and his team were engaged came about through an initial attunement to the disruption that the language was causing. As Alan succinctly puts it, "reality seemed to intrude". Being unable to reconcile the meaning of their work with their quantitative resource-levelling charts, Alan instead chose an alternative approach based in principles of engagement and conversation. By paying "less attention" to the direct measurement of resource allocation (and ignoring the premise that it actually

provided them more control) the recognition and adoption of a different language-game eventually allowed Alan to achieve the outcome he was seeking.

Alan's insight into the limitations of the project management resource model he was attempting to utilise highlights a significant theme of virtuoso project management competency. The formal project management language is just one of a multiplicity of specialist languages within the organisation, and all of them contribute to the context of a project. To adopt a single language at the expense of all others is to effectively blind the practitioner to alternative approaches (Thomas 2006).

The privilege of the over-arching meta-language, or what Rorty (1979) refers to as "nature's own vocabulary" (p.23), is a myth. The ironic stance of the virtuoso project manager grants one language no more, or less, privilege than any other. Even in times of relatively normal practice, where there are no existential threats or crisis, there will still be innumerable specialist languages at play in an organisation, each encompassing their own notions of truth and their own criteria for success or failure (Reedy 2008). A virtuoso project management practitioner recognises each of these languages and also recognises that genuine progress occurs *between* them.

In playing between languages, where the terms of one language-game do not necessarily translate meaningfully into another, for the project manager to seek a common standard of ground would actually be *irrational* (Arnold and Fischer 1994). To help demonstrate this feature of virtuoso competency, we turn to the experience of Jane, a 43-year-old project manager from Melbourne managing an IT infrastructure upgrade for a large bank. As Jane struggled with the normal day-to-day issues surrounding such a large undertaking, she was already acutely aware of the multiple languages in operation in the company and the differing perspectives onto her project this entailed:

Everyone in the business has a completely different view of your project, depending on what part of the business they are coming from. The accountants, the service operations guys, the HR people, and heaps of others, all see a completely different project.

The idea of different perspectives being driven by the nature of the language available within a specialist area is evident in Jane's observation. Watson (1994a) and Reedy (2008) have noted that language structures provide the various parts of the organisation with a framework for the way they can interpret the world, and thus shapes the way they act in it. This includes terms of 'customer satisfaction', 'teamwork' and 'responsibility' etc. Ultimately, whatever language is chosen also establishes the parameters of truth.

As long ago as 1938, in his first publication of the *The Functions of the Executive*, Barnard Chester noted:

At least this I can assert: though I found out early how to behave effectively in organizations, not until I had much later relegated economic theory and economic interests to a secondary - though indispensable - place did I begin to understand organizations or human behavior in them. (Barnard 1964:xi)

Chester's point is that attempting to describe a complex undertaking such as a modern corporation in the language of one discipline alone (in his case, economics) seriously limits our possibilities for understanding it. As Jane observed, a project can have an entirely different meaning depending on the direction from which you are looking at it.

Watson (2002) reminds us there is never just one language in operation in any large organisation, there are multiples, and it is the operation amongst multiple language-games that is the defining characteristic of project management. Berkun (2005) takes up this point in *Art of Project Management*:

It's not surprising then that the planning related books in the corner of my office disagree heavily with each other. Some focus on business

strategy, others on engineering and scheduling processes (the traditional focus of project planning), and a few on understanding and designing for customers. But more distressing than their disagreements is that these books fail to acknowledge that other approaches even exist. This is odd because none of these perspectives - business, technology, customer - can ever exist without the others. More so, I'm convinced that success in project planning occurs at the intersections in these different points of view. Any manager who can see those intersections has a large advantage over those who can't. (p.52)

As previously outlined, existing project management methods generally seek to achieve success through the application of the over-arching meta-language of formal project management practice. In doing so the meta-language of project management aims to render commensurable the disagreements to which Berkun (2005) refers. A virtuoso practitioner does not grant one language primacy over another, recognising the legitimacy of each of them in providing the framework of meaning for the organisations they serve. Jane acknowledges this point in assessing the competencies involved in her work:

I see the critical competency of the role [of project manager] as coming to grips with the agendas of the various cultures or the project as a whole basically, and just sort of looking behind the veil a bit. And not in the negative way of being a little bit wary of it, but you know, understanding where they're coming from and appreciating that.

Jane's expressions of "looking behind the veil" in order to "understand where they are coming from" exemplifies the approach of the virtuoso practitioner. To subordinate the multiplicity of languages within an organisation to another greater language, such as the formal project management meta-language, is to misunderstand the fundamental purpose for which human languages strive, which is to provide a common framework of understanding, rather than a unified basis for knowledge (Rorty 1989).

6.5 Chapter Summary

The existing practice of project management attempts to achieve a common understanding through the application of a single language. However, the myriad forms of language in operation in a modern corporation make this difficult to achieve. The increasingly sophisticated and specialised nature of work practices generates an enormous ambiguity of meaning whenever such practices are forced to interoperate (Perrin 2008). The attempt to capture all possible perspectives on the project in the context of one language becomes problematic in such an environment.

Negotiating the ambiguity of meaning within the contemporary corporation requires a deeper skill set than that provided by formal project management practice. This chapter has suggested the virtuoso project manager requires 'an attentiveness' to their practice that is not encapsulated in the formal methods. Three layers of such attentiveness have been developed in this chapter through the experiences of practising project managers.

First, there is an attunement to the physical symptoms that typically accompany disruption. Such attention allows the practitioner to use failure as the generative condition for new possibilities for success (Gendlin 1981, Flyvbjerg 2001). Peter's experience of failure in his application development project provides an example of a project manager facing significant disruption to his professional practice. Peter's choice to remain 'in the space' of the disruption and use it to gain insight into his practices can be seen as an important first step in developing a virtuoso competency.

An attunement to practice also requires recognition that our responses to disruption can just as easily encompass defensive, as opposed to reflective, responses when such disruptions arise. A defensive response by the practitioner attempts to conceal that which the disruption has revealed and is a falling back on idealised ways of doing things. Through a reflective attunement in moments of disruption, the practitioner can seek to stay in the space of the disruption rather than closing it down through idealisation (Segal 1999). Again, Peter's

experience provides us a powerful example of response to disruption as he struggles to deal with his removal from his project. His sense of professional failure at first inspires a defensive response that sees him idealise the techniques of formal project management and blame himself for not applying them. Eventually, he adopts a more reflective response and comes to see the techniques of his practice as tools that are subject to both improvement and change. It is only at this stage that Peter can begin to transcend the limitations of his existing practices.

It is the awareness of the limitations of formal project management practice that marks the final layer in the 'attentive' aspect of virtuoso competency. It is at this point that we move on from the narrative of Peter, as he continues to struggle with the limitations of his practice. We turn instead to the examples of Alan and Jane who, it can be said, are beginning to adopt an ironic stance towards the multiplicity of languages in their corporate environment (Rorty 1979). Such an ironic stance denies the privilege of any one language, including that of formal project management, and opens up to the practitioner to previously unexplored possibilities for obtaining successful project outcomes.

Alan highlights this with his attitude towards the resource-levelling technique of formal project management practice, recognising the role it plays in 'de-humanising' the people involved in the project. By engaging in dialogue with project teams members on an individual basis, Alan was able to achieve the balance of resources that the 'resource-levelling' tool of formal project management was not. Likewise, Jane's appreciation of the "agendas of the various cultures" within her company, have opened up possibilities for transforming those agendas. By "looking behind the veil" of her practices, Jane has moved us out from the experience of disruption to project management practice and into a hermeneutic approach to *altering* project management practice.

It is to the virtuoso competency of altering project management practice through redescription that the following chapter turns.

Chapter 7 – Redescribing Project Management Practice

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I show how Rorty's practice of "redescription" (1989:39) is a virtuoso project management competency. Redescription provides project managers with a tool for working between the various specialist languages that operate both within the business and outside of the business amongst customers, suppliers and competitors. I argue that project management is not a universal meta-language, independent of other specialist languages. Instead, project management practice is an activity defined by the relationships that exist between the languages of a company, and the uncertainties and ambiguities those relationships generate. I then show how redescription utilises the uncertainty and ambiguity that is inherent in business practices, and how this is an essential competency of the virtuoso project manager.

7.2 The Ironic Stance of Redescription

Heidegger (1996) suggests that we are what we practise, and that practice is determined by the language we grew up with or were "thrown" into, and we never got the chance to choose that language (p.183). Rorty builds on this and describes as an "ironist" someone dissatisfied with the terms of their language-game, and as wanting to "get out from under their inherited vocabulary" (Rorty 1989:74). An ironist is someone ruefully aware they have no "final vocabulary" (i.e. fixed and unarguable belief system), yet they recognise they cannot get along without one, as they have to deal with people who do not share their same sense of contingency (Rorty 1989:74).

This section argues the virtuoso project manager is an ironist, insofar as they share with the ironist the lingering feeling they were born into the "wrong language game" and thus tend to refer to the language of formal project management with terms such as "game", "perspective" or "conceptual framework" (Rorty 1989:75). The awareness of the contingency of their

vocabulary provides the virtuoso project manager with the opportunity to redescribe their language-games. This view can be contrasted with the more traditional practitioner, who does not want to redescribe the language-game of project management, they simply want it "accepted as it is" (Rorty 1989:73-75).

In a corporate context, Bolman and Deal (2013) offer a similar perspective on the language-game, which they call a "frame" (p.13). For Bolman and Deal, a "frame" is a "mental model – a set of ideas and assumptions – that you carry in your head to help you understand and negotiate a particular 'territory'" (p.14). They argue that "a good frame makes it easier to know what you are up against and, ultimately, what you can do about it" (p.16). A frame can also limit our ability to master complex situations. Utilising a Heideggerian motif, they observe that "managers who master the hammer and expect all problems to behave like nails find life at work confusing and frustrating" (p.27). They argue that advanced managers deliberately "reframe" complex problems in order to challenge the assumptions in which the problem is based. "The wise manager", they observe, "wants at hand a diverse collection of high quality implements. Experienced managers also understand the difference between possessing a tool and knowing how and when to use it" (Bolman and Deal 2013:27).

Similarly, Rorty (1979) presents redescription as a deliberate activity that renders existing terms within a language-game unfamiliar through their juxtaposition and/or contradiction with other terms within the same or different languages. The difference between Rorty's redescription and the tool of "reframing" offered by Bolman and Deal is that Bolman and Deal offer only four kinds of "frame". In these four frames they "consolidate major schools of organizational thought and research into a comprehensive framework encompassing four distinct perspectives ... structural, human resource, political, and symbolic" (2013:35). Each of the frames Bolman and Deal describes has fundamental axioms and principles that coincide with what Rorty refers to as a "final vocabulary". However, rather than limit our understanding of "final

vocabularies” as belonging to one of only four perspectives, Rorty sees every human practice as having its own frame.

Rorty’s view of language-games provides a far more nuanced and powerful perspective on the importance of language as a tool. A language-game is constituted by what Rorty refers to as “an agreed upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it” (Rorty 1979:320). In Rorty’s perspective, anywhere human beings find it necessary to work with one another they will generate their own language-game, one that is both parasitic on broader social languages, but also unique in its own particular deployment of linguistic terms (Rorty 1989). The interview with Peter provides us with an example of ironism in the context of project management:

Eventually you learn not to buy into any particular point of view in the organisation. You just can’t afford to. And it’s not because you think any of them are right or wrong, it’s more because you start to see right and wrong as really fluid, and maybe even right and wrong are unhelpful ways of thinking about the problem at all. All we want to do is create something new for the company but the way people talk can frequently be so invested in what they already have.

Peter demonstrates the first step in Rorty’s redescription, which is an ironic attitude towards the languages used in his organisation. Terms of ‘right and wrong’ that the specialist languages encompassed were fluid terms for Peter. They do not constitute the final word in what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and are thus open to negotiation and therefore transition.

As Rorty puts it, “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (Rorty 1979:379-389) and explains redescription as the “project of self-creation through the imposition of one’s own idiosyncratic metaphoric” (Rorty 1989:73-75). Language, for Rorty, consists entirely of terms in a transition between one of two states: metaphor and dead metaphor (or

literalness). A metaphor is simply the use of old words in unfamiliar ways, and it is the unfamiliarity of the usage that gives the expression its transformational power (Rorty 1989).

Sometimes, Rorty explains, an unfamiliar expression catches on and falls into general use. The expression becomes a familiar one and the metaphorical nature of it dies. It is now literal or 'dead'. Rorty uses the example of the 'mouth of a river' to highlight his point. When first used it must have seemed a strange expression, for only animals actually 'had' mouths, but something about the usage of it appealed, the imagery it excited stayed in our consciousness, and we now speak literally of the mouth of a river (Rorty 1989). Whilst this linguistic process is itself well understood (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), what is critical in Rorty's conception of it is how it applies to *all* our linguistic terms. Every expression we have in our language originated as a metaphor and, through the contingencies and vagaries of our history, the ones we use have settled into literalness (Rorty 1989).

Ironism, for Rorty, is the recognition of the metaphorical nature of our language and the ever-present possibility of redescription. The disruptive effect of using old terms in new and unfamiliar ways is what the ironist seeks and sees as necessary in her personal projects of self-creation (Rorty 1989). Frazier calls redescription the "engine of self-creation" and sees Rorty's ironist as wanting to "relate autonomously to their inherited vocabularies" by "getting out from under them" (Frazier 2006:462). Rorty's notion of self is therefore the product of the vocabulary we have available to us through chance, and we are free to play with that vocabulary and extend it by finding new terms. The alternative is to see some expressions in our vocabulary as permanently fixed and constant, as cohering to something outside of language and making a redescription of it nonsensical. The refusal to accept such expressions as only metaphors is to submit to the "final vocabulary" about which no further discussion can take place (Rorty 1991:160-163).

The tension in Rorty's concept of redescription is the ironist's effort to transcend her final vocabulary, whilst at the same time acknowledging that it is not possible (or even, one could argue, desirable) to completely ignore it. As Rorty puts it: "Being is what final vocabularies are about. A final vocabulary is one we cannot help using, for when we reach it our spade is turned. We cannot undercut it because we have no meta-vocabulary in which to phrase criticisms of it" (Rorty 1991:37). Another way of putting it is to say who we are right now is defined by what we take for granted in our vocabulary. As Peter noted above, "the way people talk can frequently be so invested in what they already have". Rorty argues that who we might become depends on what we are prepared to 'play' with: "Historical narratives about social and intellectual movements are the best tools to use in tinkering with ourselves, for such narratives suggest vocabularies of moral deliberation in which to spin coherent narratives about our individual lives" (Rorty 1991:163).

Ironism, as Rorty presents it, would not seem an either/or proposition, but a question of degree. How much we are prepared to 'tinker' with the terms of language determines the depth of our ironism. The following sections explore how redescription provides the tool for such tinkering, and begin with an understanding of the way in which our specialised languages evolve over time.

Rorty (1989) borrows from Darwin's evolutionary theory to help illustrate how the redescriptive process operates. In order to utilise redescription, it is necessary to understand that language evolves in the same fashion as our physiology: randomly. The ironic project manager exercises the virtuoso skill of redescription in order to take advantage of random changes in specialist languages and generate new, shared meanings between different parts of the business.

According to Rorty, prior to Darwin the explanation for the way in which species altered their physiological characteristics over time was problematic. Theological accounts of Creation could not deal with the overwhelming evidence provided in

the fossil layers (Rorty 1979). It was Darwin who eventually provided a description that accounted for that evidence. Evolution attributed change to the contingencies of random mutations and the advantage those conferred on individual members of the species for survival without the need for reference to any external forces. Those that survived passed on the advantageous genes to the next generation and so on (Rorty 1979).

Human languages respond to the same Darwinian evolutionary mechanism and Rorty sees the evidence for it in the extraordinary range of linguistic conventions, cultures and ways of life in existence around the world. We use the “noises and marks” that constitute our languages to get what we want and, occasionally, someone uses a noise or mark in a different way that, for whatever reason, provides a more useful description in that time and place. A particular noise or mark exists until the circumstances that made it a useful description changes, and another, more useful description takes its place (Rorty 1991:127).

There is at least one important respect in which redescription differs from Darwin’s evolutionary account of the species, and one that is crucial for the usefulness of redescription as a tool for the virtuoso project management practitioner. Whilst the evolution of human biology is the product of random mutations of our genes, redescription offers the possibility of a *deliberate* alteration of a particular language-game (Rorty 1979). Angelina provides a powerful example of the manner in which redescription can be used to deliberately alter a language-game, in the way she and her team utilised the term “experience” in order to achieve the aims of their project.

Initially, Angelina’s project team and the broader organisation understood ‘experience’ in the general sense of the word – as an experience *of* something. The experience of something could be either good or bad, depending on who you were and what part of the business you were in:

If an end-user in our project got hold of me in the corridor and said they wanted to talk about their experience of the product it was generally not

good! There were a couple of positive comments here and there but it was always something specific, you know, an experience of a really specific event like they had a really good performance response on a particular transaction that used to take forever on the old system.

As the project continued, however, Angelina observed a shift in the way the term “experience” was deployed and observed that:

People no longer talked about experiencing something as an end-user [of technology], they talked about ‘the experience’ as if it was something in itself, not about anything in particular anymore, but like it was the broadest description possible of the way technology helped everybody with their work. And it was really useful too. We could stop trying to define all the little bits of human interaction that made up people’s separate experiences of technology, with all those kind of inextricable differences, and just talk about ‘the experience’ and what it would deliver to them as a group.

The evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, observes that one significant difference between the biological adaptation of Darwinian evolution, and the cultural adaptation available to us courtesy of language, is that the physiological changes of evolutionary theory takes place across millennia, whilst cultural adaptation occurs over (or even within) generations (Dawkins 1976). An even more crucial difference, and one essential to the Rortian redescriptive process, is that peculiar physiological characteristic evolution has randomly granted us: consciousness. Thanks to consciousness we are able to reflect on the mechanism of our cultural adaptation and deliberately manipulate it (Rorty 1979). Such was the opportunity for redescription Angelina saw in the context of her project:

We [the project team] took advantage of everybody talking about ‘the experience’. We started to brand ourselves that way, sort of use it as a means to get everybody on the same page. No-one was sure exactly what it meant but it just seemed to suggest something better to

everyone. I know it comes across like one of those dumb marketing buzzwords you hear, but it was funny how it just kind of resonated with everyone. People were so desperate for this to work as the IT systems had been so bad for so long and we just wanted to feel like we were in an organisation that cared about us because they cared about the tools we used every day.

Human consciousness has allowed for the recognition of our “shared capacity to experience pain and humiliation” and is a significant element in the construction of a shared language (Rorty 1979:127). In Angelina’s example, this shared capacity has allowed the people associated with her project to take part in a new description, one that is yet only half-formed, but resonates with all of them due to the new description’s power to alleviate some of the collective pain they are experiencing within an organisation they feel no longer cares for them. Angelina’s skill in this particular situation is to both recognise the beginnings of a new description and then allow and even promote that description to evolve within the context of her project:

It got to the point where we actually started building our strategy around the concept of ‘experience’ because it was proving so useful. As soon as you mentioned the word in context people would be saying ‘oh yeah, that’s the new technology project, we can’t wait’, and we barely needed to say anything else. We had been trying to get that kind of attitude amongst the group for months with our briefing sessions and communications packs without any success and then suddenly, it was on! We then hired a company that specialised in ‘end-user experience’ that were incredibly helpful in crafting a rollout strategy based on this idea, which is really weird, because the only reason I found them was because we started talking about the project in that way.

Soper (2001) argues that Rorty’s observation that we all have a “shared capacity for pain and humiliation” constitutes a form of “biological essentialism” (p.115). Soper argues this biological essentialism places Rorty alongside

authors such as Charles Taylor (1989) who have argued that our shared humanness is an essential characteristic, around which our languages cohere. This could imply a contradiction in Rorty's position when he claims that there is nothing outside of our language-games to which the terms of the language can refer that would make it "universal". Yet, at the same time he claims that our "shared capacity for pain and humiliation" is "morally grounding" our language in a common purpose (i.e. avoiding pain and humiliation) (Soper 2001:115).

As indicated in the Introduction, the purpose of this dissertation is not Rortian scholarship. However, Soper's criticism needs addressing as it is crucial to Rorty's perspective on language and the process of redescription. Rorty's response to the argument of Soper is that we all have the same biology and a place in a world of real things, all of which have power over us, but they have no *authority* over us. They influence us, but we are not determined by them. As Rorty puts it, "that we all feel pain is useful because it is a description we can all share, yet it has no determinate truth on which to ground the basis of an essential humanism" (Soper 2001:130-133).¹⁰

Support for Rorty's response to the charge of essentialism can be drawn from his earlier work where he notes: "that which makes us similar is little more than the ability to use language, either to make things better or to make them worse" (Rorty 1979:301). Rorty's descriptions (like the one used by Angelina) work because they:

Help one identify oneself with communal movements that engender a sense of being a machine geared into a larger machine. This is a sense worth having. For it helps reconcile an existential sense of contingency and mortality with a Romantic sense of grandeur. (Rorty 1991:77)

Angelina's redescription of her project worked because it helped her stakeholders and her team "identify oneself" with the "larger machine", not because it was linked to something essential in our nature. Redescription as a

¹⁰ Further information regarding criticism of Rorty's work, and Rorty's defence of those criticisms, can be found in the Appendix.

competency allows a virtuoso project manager to take advantage of random shifts in the terms of specialist languages and promote the development of more useful descriptions. Such descriptions are not necessarily 'better' because they are more accurate descriptions of reality, but because their initial strangeness gives them a power to transcend traditional boundaries and create new possibilities (Rorty 1999).

It is the very strangeness of terms used in new ways that give them their power (Rorty 1989). As Angelina and her team discovered, when the term 'experience' was taken out of its normal context and used in the space of their project, it generated alternatives that had not previously existed. The meaning of the term 'experience' was now ambiguous, and it was this ambiguity of meaning that generated new possibilities for description.

In a virtuoso competency framework, project management practice exists for the purpose of creating shared meanings between all the other specialist languages of the business. Formal project management theory does not seek shared meanings between practices, but imposes a single meaning from the perspective of its own practice. This definition of project management practice is challenged in contemporary business, where the large number of specialist practices and the increasingly sophisticated nature of their language-games makes the possibility of achieving a single meaning exceedingly remote.

By contrast, a shared meaning, as opposed to a single meaning, allows for ambiguity of language terms. When terms are used outside of their existing context, they become ambiguous, with their meaning now possible to be defined in multiple ways, none of which can be anticipated. Such ambiguity enables various practices to utilise similar terms in subtly different ways, but also in ways similar enough to ensure a shared meaning. It is in the area of ambiguous meaning that the virtuoso project management practitioner operates and how the practitioner attempts to deal with this is an important consideration. As Rorty notes, an individual taking advantage of redescription

must be comfortable operating in conditions of considerable ambiguity as they are “always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change” (Rorty 1989:73-74).

A significant problem with formal project management practice is that it tries to achieve *complete* commensurability between competing specialist languages. Commensurability is the complete reduction of all the terms in every specialist language so that there is no ambiguity in the meaning of those terms. In this manner, all possible arguments between language-games can be encompassed and resolved (Hassard 1990). In an ironic approach of redescription, there is no possibility of commensurability between languages. Instead, redescription sees all languages as involved in the production of meaning for the purpose of getting what we want, yet without being reducible to a single language (Rorty 1989).

A critical aspect of redescription is that debate *can* occur between specialist languages with differing standards of right and wrong, good and bad, and so on. Rorty maintains that this is possible because such specialist languages are not completely incommensurable as “all discourse is parasitic upon normal discourse” (1979:365-366). Hassard observes that normal discourse is the everyday language we use to communicate outside of our specialist practices. We can train ourselves to communicate between the various specialist languages in an organisation because the terms underpinning them have their basis in our everyday social language (Hassard 1990).

An example of the way a virtuoso project practitioner avoids the temptation to reduce language to a single perspective can be seen in the way Angelina conceptualises project management:

It [project management] is a combination of theatre and I don't know, organising a band or a symphony or something like that to do all these complex things at the same time without it all falling apart around you.

Angelina borrows metaphors from the creative arts, such as the theatre and the symphony, to open up the possibility of the project practitioner as a director or conductor of disparate creative processes. This metaphor is also explored by Weifling (2007), who relates her own experience as a project manager to the activities of a “drum circle” in which musicians gather together to create music in a seemingly unstructured way:

Seemingly without effort, players come to agreement on what kind of music to create. Inevitably, a core group of players will establish a solid base beat so that others can ornament the music with something more intricate. As the music unfolds, individuals manage to solo without stepping on someone else’s solo. (Wiefling 2007:112)

Wiefling suggests that self-organising systems such as the drum circle are far more emblematic of how projects actually run than the command and control system demanded by the formal practice of project management (Wiefling 2007). The metaphor of the drum circle challenges the notion of meta-language, pointing instead to a practice built around sustained acts of creativity without any fixed end-point.

Another example of this is provided by the ALSTOM Transport high-speed tilting train project in the United Kingdom. Researchers into the project initially observed the tendency of the project managers to try to “conquer” the various language-games of the stakeholders with their own meta-language (Ivory, Alderman, McLoughlin and Vaughan 2006:331). They noted that once the project plan was created and distributed to the stakeholders, all discussion was undertaken within that language, effectively marginalising any “discordant voices”. The researchers suggested instead the need for “mechanisms for bringing stakeholders together to share discourses and to ensure that they are exposed to the central discourses that define the meaning of the project for the client and other key players” (Ivory, Alderman, McLoughlin and Vaughan 2006:331). Implicit in this suggestion is that there are central languages out of which other languages grow, but those other languages are not reducible to a

central language. This view is in keeping with a hermeneutic process of redescription. As Rorty observes:

Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which pre-supposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts. This hope is not a hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground, but *simply* hope for agreement, or at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement. (1979:318)

Formal project management examines organisational problems and develops solutions for the purpose of grounding all possible debate in its language-game. The aim of this model of practice is to achieve commensurability. The virtuoso practitioner, on the other hand, seeks to keep the debate open through dialogue and does not seek to close it with answers. Edification, as the central aim of redescription, is not a case of increasingly accurate representation of what *is* but rather the possibility of what *could be* (Rorty 1999).

The virtuoso project manager acknowledges the ever-present possibility of what could be. Illuminating what could be is the function of redescription. An example of redescription in project management practice can be seen in the project initiated to build critical infrastructure works to support the Sydney Olympics in 2000. Researchers investigating the project noted that due to the immense ambiguity and uncertainty of the project, formal techniques of detailed, agreed-in-advance specifications were not going to be suitable (Clegg, Pitsis, Marozzeky and Rura-Polley 2006).

Instead, all members of the project were encouraged to consider a “future perfect” state that they borrowed from the work of Shutz (1967), in which they first imagined the project was completed and then imagined the steps necessary to complete it (Clegg, Pitsis, Marozzeky and Rura-Polley 2006:273).

Whilst at first glance this may appear analogous to the 'work breakdown' process of formal project management theory (Turner 1999, Pinto 2007, Schwalbe 2007), it was far more nuanced than a simple reduction of activities.

One of the principal methods of implementing future perfect thinking in the Sydney Olympics project was through the notion of "strange conversations" (Clegg, Pitsis, Marozzeky and Rura-Polley 2006:273). Strange conversations were ones in which the "agenda, process and outcomes were unclear" and the purpose of the conversation was to "elicit the everyday grounds of routine actions". Whilst initially the conversations could create tension as the "premises from which each of the two sides came were so different", they ultimately helped to develop creative solutions for the project (Clegg, Pitsis, Marozzeky and Rura-Polley 2006:280-281).

The notion of a strange conversation serves to highlight one of the principal activities of redescription in the context of project management practice: the opening up of creative possibility within the project space through continual dialogue (Rorty 1979). This contrasts sharply with the traditional view of conversation within formal Project Management practice, which seeks to answer questions and close down dialogue through the application of a single, correct perspective. Todres (2007) points out that conversation should not be seen as providing "final and conclusive law-like absolutes" but instead provide "possibilities around which unique variations and actualities can occur" (p.74).

In elaborating on conversation as the basis of a philosophical hermeneutic, Rorty (1979) offers the view that:

To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately. (p.378)

If one were to replace the word "philosophy" in this quote with "project management", it would surely be a suitable aim for project management

practice. It would be a mistake, however, to think a practice based on ironic redescription could itself be described in systemic terms, for that would be an attempt to reduce it to the commensurability that philosophical hermeneutics in general seeks to avoid (Rorty 1979). Formal project management, like its ancestor, science, is paradigmatic. It is a language in which objective truths are sought for the purpose of legitimating a body of knowledge (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006b). Redescription, as a form of philosophical hermeneutic, is a reactive, abnormal discourse *about* languages and cannot be reduced to one of them (Rorty 1979:379-389).

The virtuoso project manager recognises a legitimate place for objective, quantifiable approaches within the broader context of project management practice but does not let them define or dominate their practice. In ruminating on the different approaches utilised within his own projects, Alan notes:

In certain very limited situations, there is clearly a particular way of doing things that is going to be superior to most of the others. Those are mainly very focused, generally technical issues where a really logical objective way of approaching something is going to yield a better result.

Alan is highlighting Rorty's point that philosophical hermeneutic enquiry *not* be considered as a replacement language for science. Redescription does not intend to supplant other languages, including formal project management theory. It does, however, serve to challenge the fundamental premises on which such languages are based.

Dwelling on the high-level of project failure she had witnessed over the years, Jane, the project manager from Melbourne, commented that:

Most project managers fail because you're not the captain of a ship, because you're not all sitting in one boat heading in the same direction. You've got a whole heap of specialists doing their little parts; no one person understands where the whole thing is heading, really. It's an entirely different proposition to being the captain of a boat or the top of

a pyramid. You are really at the bottom of the pyramid, or sort of in the middle of a circle trying to keep all of these little parts doing their bit whilst realising that not one of those parts realises exactly what all the other parts is doing. And you don't either. You're just trying to make sure enough information is flowing between them to keep them going in a sort of roughly the same general direction, and hope that something emerges out of that that will sort of do the organisation good.

Jane's observation directly challenges the orthodox metaphors of command and control typical of formal project management theory. Figure 1 provides a typical diagrammatic representation by Lewis (1999) of the command and control metaphor.

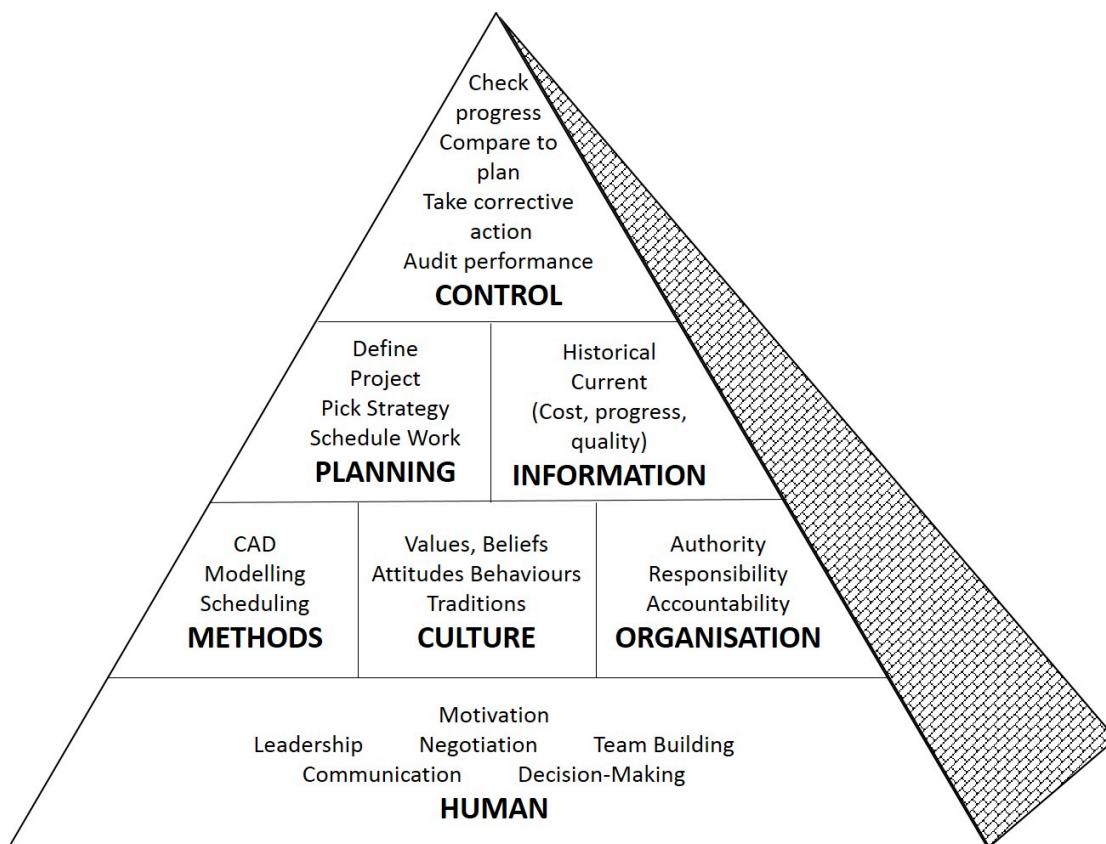


Figure 1 - The Project Management Pyramid (Lewis 1999)

This view of the project as a system is revealing for how it places the corrective, planning and controlling aspects of the project (i.e. the primary

focus of formal project management) at the top of the pyramid, with the human, cultural aspects towards the bottom (Lewis 1999). The inference is clear: culture in an organisation is something to be controlled.

The problem for the project manager who wishes to engage ironically within the context of the project and negotiate the multiple specialist languages of their business is that they must participate in systemic style debates *without taking a particular position*. Rorty thought that philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger avoided such problems by simply saying things without saying them *about* things (1979:365-372). Project managers could attempt much the same by relinquishing a preoccupation for the objective certainty of the project schedule for the creative uncertainty of the conversation. This, as already noted, does not imply that the techniques of formal project management theory have no place in project management practice, only that the scope of the project management meta-language is seriously constrained. Formal project management is limited to describing objects in the natural world in a quantitative fashion. Accordingly, it captures very few aspects of the environment in which projects operate (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas and Hodgson 2006). To stress a point made earlier, formal project management practice is concerned with *measurement*, whilst a redescriptive practice of project management is concerned with *meaning*. It is to the creation of shared meaning through redescription that the following section will turn.

7.3 Creating Shared Meanings

The creation of shared meanings in a project can be considered a specific competency of the virtuoso project manager. As previously argued, a significant factor in project failure is that project stakeholders do not see the value of the project for their practice. This failure is generated by the inability of the formal language of project management practice to describe the project in terms that are meaningful to both them and other specialist practices within the company.

This next section shows how the creation of shared meaning is a critical aspect of a virtuoso competency. One of the key obstacles to achieving any kind of shared meaning between languages, whether those languages are the social languages of the broader community or the specialist individual practices in a corporation, is that individual terms in a language do not necessarily transpose from one domain of human activity to another and retain their meaning (Macintyre 1988).

The project management practitioner stands in a unique position of operating in a practice whose purpose is the creation of shared meaning among other practices. In order to achieve this, a project practitioner needs to consider a number of factors. First, how does the practitioner establish common ground between the specialist languages of the modern organisation? Second, is effective communication possible between specialist languages and, if so, how is that accomplished? And, lastly, once communication is established, how does the practitioner manage the individual terms of the language to construct the shared meanings?

As Turner (1994) points out, activities carried out entirely within the boundary of a discrete human practice typically enjoy a high degree of internal cohesion and success because the terms utilised are commensurable with one another. As already established, commensurable means the common ground for the practice has been established through the relationship of the standard metaphors of that practice to one another within a coherent framework. Turner goes on to state that:

Practice is a word not for some sort of mysterious hidden collective object, but for the individual formations of habit that are the condition for the performances and emulations that make up life. No one is immured by these habits. They are, rather, the stepping-stones we use to get from one bit of mastery to another. (Turner 1994:124)

Turner's position on practices is aligned with Rorty's (1979) observation that the linguistic terms we deploy in practices are metaphoric, and that they do not refer outside of the practice for their meaning. Turner (1994) agrees with Rorty that knowledge, as expressed in human language and utilised in human practices, is always contextual and contingent. As already argued, the idea of a practice whose language corresponds in some way to reality and exists independently of its socio-historical context is a myth. Indeed, as Rorty points out, the actual idea of "correspondence to reality" is itself a metaphoric construction of the scientific language we have inherited from the historical period of the Enlightenment (Rorty 1979:333).

In the context of this understanding, all meaning is in fact 'shared' meaning, and it is entirely informed by the language within which the meaning is expressed (Rorty 1982). Accounting, engineering and finance are examples of modern specialist practices with relatively consistent *internal* languages. When such practices differ on a question of meaning outside of the practices themselves, there is no possible reference outside of those practices to a neutral third party capable of rendering meaning commensurable between them (Rorty 1979). This represents the key challenge for the project manager, operating within and between the multiple practices of an organisation. As Angelina observes:

I spend most of my time getting different parts of the business to talk. To discuss the bits and pieces they have to do to make the project happen. So it's not like I do anything at all. All the work is done by these different groups and I am just organising it. But how I organise it is tricky. I can't actually tell them what to do and a lot of the time I don't know what they do anyway, they've got these special ways of doing things that only they understand. The problem starts when they think the way they do things applies to everybody else.

The final sentence of Angelina's observation, "the problem starts when they think the way they do things applies to everybody else", highlights the obstacle

in establishing common ground: namely, the degree to which *any* kind of commensurability, and thus shared meaning, is achievable between the specialist languages of various business practices.

This problem of communicating between specialist language-games is commented on by Hassard (1990), who observes that meaning is generated within “an infrastructure of species specific possibilities delimiting the conceptions that can emerge – a form of life expressing both the grounds for language and the limits of such possibilities” (p.225). Hassard observes that among management theorists there is confusion over whether specialist languages in an organisation are, in fact, completely incommensurable. He notes a contradictory position that claims language exclusivity, whilst at the same time demanding practitioners who are specialists in more than one language, which seems to imply that meaning *is* communicable between languages (Hassard 1990).

That generating some form of shared meaning between specialist language-games is possible is critical for a virtuoso project management competency based in redescription. Without shared meaning between practices, project management stands as little more than another specialist language in a company, vying for dominance with the others in a competitive framework that is emblematic of formal project management practice (Smith 2006). Specialist languages and the practices they inform are essentially based in our relationship to the world, even though they do not correspond to them (Hassard 1990). No matter how abstracted our specialist language games become, we can communicate between them because they all share the same ‘species-specific limitations’. In short, all specialist narratives are used by human beings to deal with the world they inhabit and that is the basis of communication between them. This point is well made by Angelina:

All those groups with all their perspectives and different ways of describing things, and all thinking they are right. You can't really appeal

to one group in terms of another. Finance doesn't care about engineering problems any more than engineering cares about theirs. They don't really get each other at all. But we are all people, right? And that's where you have to start, because there are a lot of ways of talking about stuff that we do share.

What Hassard offers is a clarification of Rorty's notion of incommensurability. He agrees with Rorty that specialist languages are not commensurable in that they share any kind of actual correspondence to reality that would serve as the basis of a positivistic foundationalism. Nor, however, are they completely incommensurable and exclusive (Hassard 1990). Angelina's observation that "we are all people, right?" is a reminder that languages are tools for "coping" with the world (Rorty 1979:356), and it is the shared purpose of *coping* with (and not *corresponding* to) the world that offers the possibility of inter-language communication and shared meaning (Hassard 1990).¹¹

It is important to distinguish, therefore, between work carried out within the confines of a particular practice (i.e. marketing) and a broader project whose activities transcend individual practices (such as the implementation of a new technology that is utilised by multiple departments). From the perspective of this dissertation, only the latter is considered a project. The former may be a "unique undertaking" of some kind, and thus meet the classic definition of a project, but as it is undertaken within the constraints of a particular specialist language-game, it is better considered as simply a function of that practice (Lewis 1999:5).

¹¹ The middle ground between full commensurability and non-commensurability is reflected in the area of Critical Realism, a philosophical term coined by Roy Bhaskar, which sets itself in opposition to both the naive realism of the positivist school of the physical sciences (which this dissertation argues formal Project Management practice has inherited) and the potentially equally naive school of the pure social constructionists for whom 'reality' itself is a linguistic construction. Whether or not Rorty should be considered an exponent of the latter is an argument beyond the scope of this dissertation. What is essential and necessary from both Rorty and Bhaskar's work is that genuine commensurability (i.e. the collapsing of all languages into a single over-arching language) is problematic for human practices, and any theory making such a claim has an ideological foundation that limits the possibility of its own self-reflection and improvement. Ref: Bhaskar, R. (1975). A realist theory of science. London, Routledge.

A project becomes a project when its objectives are not encompassed by the language of a single practice, but instead span several practices. In this context, changing a process within the accounting department would not be considered a project, but changing the way budgets are developed by the entire business would be. In the case of the former, there would be little interaction between the individual charged with changing the accounting process and anyone outside the accounting department. The change would be entirely encompassed within the language of accounting practice. A change to the way the entire company developed its budgets would conceivably affect every department and therefore every kind of practice the company had. This would involve creating a set of shared meanings around the new budgeting process that would extend beyond just the accounting practice.

This definition of the project implies that the normal mode of operation for a practice of project management is that of a language informed by, and informing in turn, multiple specialist languages. As Angelina sees it:

I guess the whole experience really did change my view of the role of what the project manager was about. I guess I started with the understanding it was about just getting things done, getting jobs and organising people to do their bits. So you do this, you do that, you've got to do this before that, and away they went. And to an extent in its simplest form it is doing exactly that. But it doesn't take very long before the complexities make those small bits and pieces exceedingly difficult. And I think, as I said, anywhere where you're just doing that inside a single department or a single line of business, is not really a project as I would describe it to people; it's when it spans all those departments, different customers, different organisations, that's when you're really in the world of project management

The creation of shared meanings as a competency of the virtuoso project manager has its foundation in the recognition of project management as a practice that spans multiple other practices. This places the project manager in

the rare position of being a practitioner for whom the usual well-defined meanings that inform other practices are not readily available. As Angelina puts it, “when it spans all those departments, different customers, different organisations, that’s when you’re really in the world of project management”. In such a world, where there are multiple possible meanings attributable to various language terms, such terms become ambiguous, and add a further dimension to the project management practitioner’s task.

An appreciation of the linguistic nature of project management practice, and the role it has in the creation of shared meanings, is the chief concern of the virtuoso project management practitioner. Angelina demonstrates this when she talks about the different kinds of ‘logic’ in an organisation:

It’s not about the technology, it’s about ... so the key competency is, yeah, probably an ability to think ... oh, sort of logical thinking is just one aspect of it. It’s kind of weird because it’s not just logical thinking you need to have, because there’s sort of different kinds of logic. The engineers have their own kind of logic, which is close to what I would call real logic or mathematical logic, I guess, or something like that. Then the accountants have a kind of logic, too, but it’s around numbers; but even though it’s around numbers it’s not mathematical logic. There’s something weird about the way accounts departments work. It doesn’t necessarily need to add up, it just needs to balance, which can be two different things, it’s kind of strange. And then the finance, it’s about the dollars and things like this. So there’s a different kind of logic in different areas of the organisation.

The logic Angelina refers to is the different kind of meanings that different practices can attribute to the same terms. The accounting department in a modern corporation will deploy the appropriate accounting standards, utilising metaphors of ‘profit’, ‘loss’, ‘return on investment’ and so on to arrange and manage the work undertaken within their practice. Each of these metaphors

gains their meaning, and thus their usefulness, from their relationship to the other metaphors in the practice. Thus, the terms 'profit' or 'loss' gain their meaning from each other, as well as from other associated metaphors within the practice of accounting. Taken together, these metaphors constitute the specialist language that is recognised as 'accounting practice'. In this context the deployment of the terms of accounting practice *is* actually accounting practice (Turner 1994).

Due to the lack of complete commensuration between language-games, specific terms can have markedly different meanings and application depending on the frame of reference (Hassard 1990). Angelina alludes to this understanding with her observation that "there's something weird about the way accounts departments work. It doesn't necessarily need to add up, it just needs to balance, which can be two different things, it's kind of strange". The strangeness Angelina alludes to but can't quite articulate is that accounting terms only make sense in relation to other accounting terms. They do not translate directly into other practices. In accounting practice "cost" may refer to the fixed or variable consumption of resources to sustain the manufacturing process (Hoggett, Edwards and Medlin 2003:330-351). In financial practice cost may refer to the weighted average cost of the capital necessary to provide such resources (Frino, Kelly, Comerton-Forde and Cusack 2004:201-231), whilst in economic practice, cost will invariably be associated with the price of bringing manufactured goods to market (McTaggart, Findlay and Parkin 2003:102-104).

The same issue applies to other specialist practices within the domain of business, such as finance, operations, marketing, human resources and information technology. Each one deploys its own specialist language into which any newcomer must be inculcated in order for them to be able to engage in that particular practice effectively (Rorty 1979, MacIntyre 1984, Turner 1994). A project manager must, as Angelina notes, learn to 'navigate' these languages:

And that's where the challenge comes in. And that's why I think so many projects fail. It's simply because they haven't really set the terms

properly on how they're going to succeed, because they are trying to succeed for different kinds of problems, which is next to impossible. So the project manager has got to try and navigate that somehow, try and get to a common problem definition and try and make it clear to all parties as to what this project is going to do for them. And it's going to do different things for different people.

Success in the context of a project, as Angelina demonstrates, is not defined from the perspective of one particular language-game, but from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. Understanding the terms each of these stakeholders deploy in the context of their particular practice, and being in a position to articulate a shared meaning that resonates with all of them is the central aim of project management and a key virtuoso competency.

7.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have shown how, utilising the tool of redescription, a virtuoso project manager is able to alter the language-games of business practices and create shared meanings between them. The chapter began by examining how virtuoso project managers surpass the inflexible and problematic meta-language of formal project management practice, and thereby remain open to the contingent possibilities as the project unfolds. As reality intrudes upon a project the virtuoso project manager has an opportunity to redescribe situations as they occur, moving between specialist languages to assist in manufacturing shared meaning proactively.

It was shown that the key to enabling such redescriptions to flourish is the virtuoso skill of developing the ambiguous aspects of the new descriptions as it is interpreted by different practices. The virtuoso project manager encourages contradictory or paradoxical dialogue within the project environment. In doing so new descriptions can emerge. The significance of these descriptions to individual specialist practices cannot be predicted in advance, as they bear no

“correspondence to reality” (Rorty 1979:333). Their power is to provide a more useful way for practitioners to engage in their practices by showing them previously unconsidered ways of thinking about their work.

Chapter 8 – ‘Being-in’ Project Management Practice

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I address a third aspect of virtuoso project management practitioner competency: “Being-in” project management practice. This is essentially the reverse of the process of disruption, as the virtuoso project manager now seeks to “re-inhabit” their role and regain the absorption in their practice that they had lost through disruption (Jager 1994:154-155). I argue it is only in the space of absorption that the virtuoso project manager can respond “holistically and intuitively” as a “deeply engaged performer” to the needs of their practice (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas and Hodgson 2006:681) and close the hermeneutic circle of understanding and the practice-reflection-practice cycle outlined by Crawford (2006).

Being-in the practice of project management takes redescription further by adopting Heidegger’s idea of a “way of being”. Heidegger uses “way of being” (1993:53) to describe the way in which we “inhabit” our roles, rather than merely perform them. To “inhabit” a role is to be so absorbed in our practices that we no longer even notice that we are doing them (Jager 1994:154). As Flores notes, when we use a new tool for the first time it is unfamiliar. We use the tool self-consciously, acutely aware of the feel of it as we go about our day-to-day activities. Incorporating the new tool into our practice requires that we make it familiar to us, that it finds its place within our existing practices (Flores 2000). Our way of being in our practice is our way of incorporating the tools of our practices into our everyday activities so that they eventually become part of the background of our everyday familiarity (Heidegger 1993).

This chapter explores two different ways of being in project management practice. It demonstrates the ways a project manager might employ the tool of redescription in their everyday activities, and the advantages and disadvantages of each way. It shows that deliberate identification with a specific way of being can have a profound impact on the success of the virtuoso practitioner in utilising redescription.

I begin by using Macintyre's (1984) theory of practice to inform an understanding of the relationship between the practice and the institutions that support them. Such understanding is important to the way of being in project management. I then utilise two different philosophical types from Rorty's work to describe these ways of being.

8.2 The Practice and the Institution

In this section I argue that the relationship between the practice of project management and the institutions that support that practice has implications for how a project manager might choose the way of being in their practice. By understanding the relationship between the aims of a practice such as project management, and the aims of an institution such as the modern corporation, the virtuoso project manager will be better equipped to adopt an appropriate way of being in project management.

Macintyre (1984) describes a practice as a well-defined, yet sophisticated, human activity with its own values and standards. Practices are different from institutions in that institutions move towards "external" goods whilst practices move towards "internal" goods (p.196). An example of an external good is profit. If the value of the work being undertaken is measured entirely by the degree of profit made, then that work does not fit the definition of a practice. A practice places value on internal goods, which is the value to the practitioner of being involved in the practice. Through their involvement with the practice, the practitioner gains benefits that extend beyond profit. A sense of belonging, the respect of their community, and the self-insight that comes from devoting one's working life to a particular discipline, are all examples of the internal goods towards which a practice moves. It is the distinction between internal and external goods that differentiates a practice from other kinds of complex work effort (MacIntyre 1984:194-197).

Linehan and Kavanagh (2006) maintain that corporations, no matter how complex, are not practices as such, as they are aimed at only external goods, that is, profit. Developing Macintyre's ideas, they argue an internal good is something available to a practitioner exclusively within the confines of a practice. An internal good is the reward available to a practitioner through the pursuit of excellence in the practice itself, the concept of which is captured in the Greek term *arête* (Linehan and Kavanagh 2006). They refer to a passage from Macintyre (1984), who further defines practice as:

Any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (p.185)

Whilst Macintyre argues that institutions such as the modern private corporation, university or hospital are not practices due to their focus on external goods, they are critical to sustaining the practices that operate within them (MacIntyre 1984). The relationship of practices such as project management to these institutions is therefore dependent on the practices being able to avoid the corrupting influence of an institution's natural competitiveness (Linehan and Kavanagh 2006). Peter, the 32-year-old project manager from Perth introduced in the previous chapter, captures this tension between the internal goods of the practice and the external goods of the broader organisation. In his assessment of the challenges he faced in the software development project he was running he notes:

It wasn't always easy to balance doing the right thing as a project manager and what the broader organisation required. You'd think those things would be the same, I mean, how could they be different, right? But they often were. What I considered the right way of doing

something in the project, say, always being 100% honest with estimates, was frequently challenged. I was forced to change estimates so many times because people higher up than me were frightened by what people higher up than them would think! And nearly always, it was to make the estimate lower.

Paradoxically, it is the sophisticated nature of the activities that constitute a practice such as project management that make it susceptible to the corrupting influence of the institution. This is in contrast to the relatively non-corruptible nature of simple activities such as bricklaying. Karlsson (2004) notes that bricklaying would be considered a “non-practice” in Macintyre’s view because the activity of bricklaying is inseparable from the role of bricklayer – that is, a bricklayer’s job is to lay bricks. A concept of practice is inappropriate for such a simplified type of work, as it adds nothing to the description of that type of work.

Whilst at first glance this may seem elitist, Garcia (2003) argues that Macintyre is not suggesting that people engaged in more menial types of work such as bricklaying occupy a lower social status, or that a bricklayer cannot seek to “inhabit” their role in the same manner as a practitioner. Instead, Garcia maintains, Macintyre is arguing that a theory of practice is simply unnecessary for those of kinds of roles.

The reasoning behind Macintyre's distinction between non-practice and practice is rooted in his observations that non-practices have a significant degree of cohesion between the physical activities that define the role and a description of them, whilst a practice does not (MacIntyre 1984). A ‘cohesive’ non-practice role, such as the bricklayer, clearly specifies the behaviour of a particular individual as that behaviour is closely related to the physical or intellectual activity performed (McMylor 1994). It is the degree of cohesion between the activity performed in the role and the description of the role that makes the non-practice less corruptible than the practice. Peter makes this observation himself in the context of his project when he notes:

There were days when I was desperately jealous of the coders [software programmers] in my team. Sure it was a hard job, tonnes of code to get through every day, generating new scripts, tracking down bugs and the like. But it was also a really simple job in a lot of ways. They had one thing to do and do well. It was a deep, intellectually demanding job, and yet ... it didn't seem to leave them emotionally drained the way I felt at the end of the day. They could work some very long hours, go home and sleep and then come back and do it all again and be excited about it. There wasn't a moral dimension to their work and I think that is what drains you.

Peter's point is that relatively simple non-practices such as software coding, like the bricklayer, are not faced with the same moral questions that more sophisticated practices such as project management face. This is not to say roles such as bricklaying or coding are less demanding. Peter agrees that role of the software programmer is a deeply challenging and satisfying one. He points out that such satisfaction can arise from having "one thing to do and do well". The difference is that such roles are not exposed to the complicated demands that face project managers, where the activities are not so clearly defined, nor the aims so neatly spelled out. A software programmer or bricklayer has limited priorities, whereas a project manager is faced with multiple competing priorities. It is in the area of those competing priorities that the possibility of the corruption of the work emerges.

Macintyre (1984) helps us understand the susceptibility of the modern practice to corruption by exploring the transition of pre-modern Heroic society to the age of civilisation initiated by the Greco-Roman period. It was this transition, Macintyre argues, that demanded the new concept of "the practice". In the Heroic model all relationships were judged on a mutually agreed set of skills around which a particular role in society was constructed. As such, a warrior engaged in battle, and was judged almost exclusively on his skill in that regard; similarly the farmer and the blacksmith. There was no separate moral

dimension to these roles. They either met the requirements of the role or they didn't (MacIntyre 1984).¹²

The significance of MacIntyre's observation is that the technological advancement and the increasingly complex interactions between social roles since Heroic times have demanded an increasingly sophisticated terminology to encompass the range of circumstances those interactions have produced. Simple descriptions such as 'a warrior wins battles' or 'farmer grows crops' are not as easily applied to the roles that have emerged: for example, 'a politician ... does what?' or a 'project manager ... does what?' In MacIntyre's view, being unable to clearly articulate the function of a role makes it harder to articulate the moral parameters of it as well:

What each person is confronted with is at once a set of rival intellectual positions, a set of rival traditions embodied more or less imperfectly in contemporary forms of social relationship and a set of rival communities of discourse, each with its own specific modes of speech, argument, and debate, each making a claim upon the individual's allegiance. (1988:393)

Owing allegiance to multiple stakeholders and their competing perspectives and agendas makes a sophisticated human practice such as project management different from other kinds of activities in the modern world.

As Peter said, "I was forced to change estimates so many times because people higher up than me were frightened by what people higher up than them would think!" Practices are not susceptible to corruption by the institutions in which they operate because they *lack* moral guidelines. Practices, if anything, pay greater attention to the moral dimension of their work than other forms of activity because they have to do so (Solomon 1996).

¹² MacIntyre's notion hinges on the fact that the software programmer, like the bricklayer, does not usually have a complete understanding of the ends towards which their work is put, and are therefore generally free from the 'moral' issues with which a project manager is faced. For example, the project manager would be expected to know that the purpose of the software his project is creating is to assist in more accurately targeting cigarette sales, whilst the programmer, conceivably, may not. How far this may be true in a modern, information-rich environment, and how much any individual can be expected to know of the ultimate ends of their work (and therefore what responsibility they can take for it), is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Why do moral questions arise so frequently and become so difficult to resolve in modern practices such as project management? A significant reason is the systemic unpredictability built into the majority of our practices, and it is this unpredictability that makes the moral dimension of practice so hard to articulate (MacIntyre 1984).

Systemic unpredictability can arise in practices in many ways: the impossibility of predicting radical innovation, the influence of decisions by people involved in the practice itself, or the “infinite reflexivity” of the game, in which I try to “predict you predicting me, predicting you” (MacIntyre 1984:88-108). As humans we tend to try to predict the success of our own plans in the world whilst protecting ourselves from the plans of others by being unpredictable.

Systemic unpredictability and inherent reflexivity are features of the contemporary corporation and the projects operating in them. This can be seen in Peter’s struggle to develop a coherent plan for his project stakeholders:

The first thing you notice is the extraordinary psychological effect of asking someone for an estimate of how long something is going to take. It does not matter how you break that question down, or how many times they have done it, the answer will still be an out-and-out evasive one. And it’s not like people don’t know, but I think they realise that it’s a loaded question. They know they’ll be giving an answer based on ideal conditions, and be held to that, when the ideal conditions don’t exist. Whether or not the schedule ends up representing how the project actually goes is just pure luck.

The evasiveness highlights a fundamental issue: *people do not like being measured* (MacIntyre 1984). In Peter’s case he is asking for other practitioners to offer him a standard against which their professional performance will be measured. An architect for example, might indicate that he can complete a solution design for the project in 12 days. If they are unable to deliver the

design it speaks to their professional capabilities. It is not a measurement of time, but of *them* (House 1988).

The difficulty in a complicated, practice-based process such as effort estimation is that even under circumstances where people accept the need for specific measurements of their applied skills, they recognise that whatever estimate is provided remains an estimate *under ideal conditions*. In the context of a project, these conditions are unknowable in advance. The architect, no matter how skilled or experienced, cannot say, before the design is completed, exactly what it will contain, and therefore exactly how long it will take to complete (DeCarlo 2004).

The individual providing the estimate is therefore essentially a player in a game between them and the project manager who is asking for the estimate. What is at stake in this game is an aspect of their professional identity, encapsulated in their ability to accomplish the agreed upon activity in the amount of time allocated to them in the task bar of a GANNT chart. As Peter highlights:

You get into this thing of trying to outguess each other. They [the project stakeholders providing the estimates] know what you want but also know they can't give it to you. If they do they will undoubtedly fail to deliver it. So they 'pad' the estimate, giving themselves as much room as they can to deal with the unknowns they know will happen. I [the project manager] can't afford this as it blows the schedule out so I make a guess as to how much they have padded the estimate and try and reduce it. Trouble is, they know I'm going to do this so they add a little bit more to compensate... and around it goes!

The circular activity Peter refers to is generated by the fact that formal project estimating methods, encapsulated in such frameworks as Prince-2, assume ideal conditions for estimating activities (and, indeed, in the case of Prince-2, such assumptions are carried in its name – Projects in Controlled Environments) (Bentley 2002). Complexity theory, in particular, argues against the possibility of overall scheduling activities being successful, due to the compounding nature

of possible deviations in the estimates – that is, small estimating errors in early project activities will combine to produce errors that are orders of magnitude greater by the end (Pich, Loch and Meyer 2002).

Cicmil (2006) notes the limitation of techniques such as Prince-2 in dealing with complexity and the systemic unpredictability it produces and argues instead that “project managers seem to intuitively know that project plans are not the first step toward control, but an opportunity to build alliances, negotiate meaning, reinterpret the project in the moments of dislocation (simultaneously ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’, ‘being’ and ‘not being’ in control)” (Cicmil 2006:32).

Cicmil’s point is supported by the experience of Angelina, a 35-year-old project manager implementing a new supply chain management system for an international airline freight company. In dealing with the requirements to estimate activities and produce timelines in her own program of work, Angelina comments:

The plan and the schedule are not tools for controlling the project. No-one reads the plan after it is created, and it rarely gets updated for that reason. Everything is too fluid. And the schedule is basically a lie that everyone has agreed to. Control comes about when you start to let go of it. Not easy to do when you are a Type A like me! Thinking you are in control leads you to try and solve every problem, which is impossible, and then you lose control. I know that’s a bit of a paradox! But it will all turn to shit at some point and when it does you cannot afford to pretend it was your failure by pretending you had absolute control. “It is what it is” is my favourite saying, and it could have just as easily been something else so don’t sweat it too much. Just deal with it as it comes.

“The lie that everyone has agreed to” is an eloquent assessment of the project schedule’s value in organisational culture. Angelina’s observation that a project “is what it is” and “could just as easily been something else” demonstrates her awareness of the contingent aspects of the project and relates this

understanding to the unsuitability of formal Project Management tools to deal with that contingency. Likewise, her statement “you cannot afford to pretend it was your failure” also draws out the critical nature of the relationship between the project management practitioner and the contingent nature of the project environment. For practitioners to measure themselves against a paradigm built on a lie everyone has agreed to constitutes a significant paradox in the language of formal project management practice. The point of developing virtuoso competencies of practice is to articulate what many project managers, such as Angelina, know intuitively about their practice. By providing a specific set of advanced skills that can be learned, project managers can move beyond the limitations of formal project management language.

As shown above, formal project management techniques struggle to deal with the systemic unpredictability of corporate practices, and it is this that leads to ambiguity. Paradoxically, this is caused by project managers attempting to *eliminate* ambiguity through the application of their over-arching meta-language. This section links Macintyre’s theory of practice with Rorty’s redescription by arguing that redescription provides a more effective tool for dealing with the systemic unpredictability of business practices. It is more effective, primarily, because it does not attempt to eliminate ambiguity, but *uses* it to generate shared meaning between project stakeholders.

How redescription achieves this is by dealing with each specialist practice in the organisation *on its own terms*. Each specialist language has its own fundamental premises and axioms, and it is these axioms the virtuoso practitioner seeks to uncover. Rorty notes that “nothing is so valuable for the hermeneutic enquirer into an exotic culture as the discovery of an epistemology written within that culture”(1979:346).

This section argues that the various specialist practices of the organisation can be considered “exotic cultures” in Rorty’s sense of the term. The virtuoso practitioner becomes the “hermeneutic enquirer” into those “exotic cultures”,

and seeks the fundamental premises and axioms, the “epistemology” on which the practice is based. Jane supports this argument by recalling:

The world of project management is weird because you’ve got all of those different business units trying to get their own view of the world ... and, yeah, the way they see it is, it’s the right way as far as they’re concerned. And you can’t argue with them on that point a lot. I mean sometimes you get a small win and show them the error of their ways and show them where their thinking is perhaps not quite right. But sometimes their thinking rests on principles that are just basically incompatible with other parts of the business. They are sort of fundamentals that aren’t going to change ...

The fundamentals Jane speaks of are the axioms of a particular specialist language. Her observation that “it’s right as far as they’re concerned” leads to the situation in which “you can’t argue with them on that point”. Specialist languages serve a valuable purpose in providing a cohesive framework within which practitioners can situate themselves and resolve specific issues within their practice but, as Macintyre (1984) points out, it the basis of a *particular* kind of reasoning, rather than *all* reasoning in general.

The issue of specialist practitioners mistaking the language of their practice, and the thinking it defines, for a language that applies to all situations is a critical one. For, as Jane observes “sometimes their thinking rests on principles that are just basically incompatible with other parts of the business”. Different specialist languages have evolved around solving different kinds of problems. Whilst such languages typically provide an effective framework for resolving problems *within* the practice, the business-wide problems that projects are generally created to resolve *exceed* the language of any one practice.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the meta-language of project management practice attempts to resolve business-wide problems by applying another over-arching language. In attempting to solve a problem that spans the languages of multiple practices in the terms of the project management

language alone, the project manager falls into the space of what Angelina called the “lie everyone has agreed to”.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the virtuoso project manager recognises the unsuitability of the meta-language approach but is left with another challenge. How do they change the language of existing practices to accommodate the organisational changes the project is demanding? Specifically, how does a language change when the language itself provides the framework within which such a transition could be discussed? As Jane observed, the terms of a specialist language constitute, at least in the beginning, “fundamentals that aren’t going to change”.

8.3 The Project Manager as a Strong Poet

The first “way of being” in project management practice this chapter explores is Rorty’s archetype of the “strong poet”. As Rorty sees it, the strong poet is an individual dedicated to “revolutionary change” (Rorty 1989:178). This section shows how, in the context of project management, identification with the archetype of the strong poet is a limiting one for the practitioner. Despite the ironic attitude and utilisation of redescription that the strong poet shares with the ironic liberal (explored in the next section), the strong poet’s revolutionary approach to change serves to marginalise the practitioner within the organisation.

Rorty sees literary figures such as Nabokov, Proust, Freud, Nietzsche and Derrida as exemplars of the strong poet. The significance of their writing was the manner in which they saw language as open to “indefinite and radical change” (Rorty 1989:103-107). Rorty does not limit the archetype of the strong poet to practitioners of the literary form. Strong poets include revolutionaries, activists, philosophers and indeed anyone who is attempting to redescribe for themselves and the rest of the community the language in which self and community are made in the first place (Rorty 1989).

In contextualising the activities of the strong poet, Rorty (1999) acknowledges the pursuit of stable social forms as a dominant and necessary feature of human activity, otherwise our lives would be in a permanent state of flux. Stable social forms, for Rorty, are represented by a consistent set of terms for expressing the fundamental values of our society. If the language we use in our day-to-day activities were open to continual shifts in the meaning of their terms, life would become chaotic and confusing. Accordingly, it is only ever a small section of society that adopts the role of the strong poet and attempts to redescribe their practices in radical ways (Rorty 1979). Rorty identifies his own philosophical project as making strong poets the new heroic archetypes of society in place of the scientist archetype that he thinks has come to dominate since the Enlightenment (Rorty 1989).

This section argues that the strong poet is not an appropriate archetype to replace the scientific archetype that has come to dominate project management practice. The radical change that the strong poet seeks to make in existing language-games is problematic in the context of contemporary corporations and the practices that support them.

As Peter noticed in his project to roll out a new on-line messaging and collaboration system to 18,000 people, the biggest challenge was not the logistics or technical demands of the deployment, but overcoming resistance to the changes in the work environment that the new system engendered:

There were all these new terms we had to float around like 'workgroup collaboration', 'instant messaging' and 'multi-authoring'. This was all describing the new way people were going to be working using the new tools we were giving them. They'd gotten new IT before, but it was always kind of linear, you know, more of the same except a little bit faster with more features and used exactly the same way. This time they had to change the way they practised their work.

Peter's project introduced a system of 'multi-authoring' which allowed a single document to be accessed and worked on by any number of people at the same time from anywhere in the world. The system automatically keeps track of the changes so there is only ever a single document. This allowed everyone to see who was making the changes in real time, and comment on or accept or reject what had been done.

Apart from an improvement in productivity, the new system was also meant to lower storage costs by reducing the vast numbers of copies of documents in existence as a result of the same document being emailed between people for revision and review. As Peter discovered during initial piloting, people refused to use the new system in the way it had been designed:

Despite all the training we gave them, they [the end-users] were still working on documents individually and then emailing it to each other for their turn, same as they always had. We were getting none of the benefits we had planned. When we talked to some of the users about this we discovered a real mind-set around the word 'authoring'. Authoring implied ownership and people did not want that ownership of 'their' document shared amongst the group. It might have been a document about a quarter percentage movement in fuel costs or something, but they had crafted it themselves.

The people in Peter's project were now experiencing a state of disruption and had become acutely aware of a tool whose use would ordinarily have passed without notice. The reluctance to embrace the new multi-authoring tool provides an example of Segal's (1999) defensive response to disruption, and captured by Peter with the word "mind-set".

The problem with a tool, Segal (1999) notes, is generally not the tool itself, but the particular way in which the tool relates to a set of practices. At a purely functional level, Peter's project was implementing a word processor, which is simply a means for applying characters to a page, no different from a pen or a typewriter, two earlier forms of the same tool. In the context of human

practice, though, particularly within practices of the knowledge-intensive variety in modern businesses, a word processor is an embedded feature, part of the context of people's everyday working lives (Botton 2009).

Within the context of Peter's project, the relationship is defined by the term 'authoring', which, more than describing just the physical function of placing words on a page, describes a specific feature of human practice that encapsulates a moral domain as much as it does the physical (Segal 1999). As Peter observed:

A lady named Sue in HR explained to me that it was unprofessional to give other people access to her document until it was finished. She took immense pride in the quality of her work and I could see the awards she had received for it on her desk. And she made another good point with me too, she said something like "we are encouraged to take ownership of our work, but are then asked to jointly produce a piece of work. Where is the ownership or responsibility in that?" She didn't think anyone would care enough to craft their work like her, because they didn't own it.

Sue has introduced Peter to the moral domain of his project and it hinges on the word 'authoring' and the implications of craft, responsibility and ownership contained within it. Challenging an existing language-game can be far more than a simple difference of opinion; it can often speak to the moral dimension of a practice. In Sue's view of the world, authoring is a term of significance within her professional language-game, one that has implications for her professional identity and the moral authority it provided. Sue's professional identity has been directly challenged by the new description of multi-authoring that, from her point of view, has led to a diminution of her practice.

The description of 'authoring' is now going through a period of transition. In its current usage within Sue's practice it is a familiar term. The variation of multi-

authoring has rendered the term unfamiliar (Rorty 1989). Despite the unfamiliarity of the term not all people shared Sue's negative view of this new description. As Peter notes:

For every person we found who hated the new tool, there was somebody who loved it. And it was never the one' you thought either. I mean, usually it's the older staff (and I guess that's me too!) who are wary of change, but it's not always like that. I think it just comes down to whether someone can see the possibilities there or not.

With any new description, the point can arrive where it gets taken up. This can occur despite the challenge the new description offers to the established way of doing things. This is generally because it opens up new and more interesting possibilities for dealing with the world (Rorty 1979). At this point, the language-games that inform our practices go through a period of change where practitioners are divided between those quickly embracing the new descriptions, and those resisting (Kuhn 1996).

Rorty (1979) notes that when new terms are used within a language they are inevitably parasitic upon old terms, but are deployed in new ways to render the old terms unstable (e.g. 'multi-authoring' is parasitic upon 'authoring'). Invariably, these new terms suffer an initial rejection on the grounds they cannot be made commensurable within the existing language. They are literally "irrational" because "rationality" itself is determined entirely through the relationship of the old terms to one another in the existing language, and the language is not yet inclusive of the new term (Rorty 1979:333-342). This is what Peter found in his conversation with Sue. For her, 'multi-authoring' literally did not make sense. "We are encouraged to take ownership of our work, but are then asked to jointly produce a piece of work. Where is the ownership or responsibility in that?"

Rorty (1979) draws our attention to similar attempts at revolutionary transitions that have been instigated by strong poets in other specialist languages. In psychology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sigmund Freud sought to

redescribe the terms of our own personal identification scheme, introducing such metaphors as “ego”, “super-ego”, “id” and “unconscious” (Freud 1962). In doing so, Freud offered human beings what Rorty calls a “richer explanandum” for making sense of who we were and why we acted and felt some of the ways we do (Rorty 1979:283).

There is no reason, Rorty argues, why some of these fictional metaphorical constructs, like ‘ego’ or ‘id’, should have caught on whilst others didn’t, because their adoption necessarily preceded inclusion in a context that would make their selection rational. People simply chose to speak in these new ways because they found it useful (Rorty 1979). Post-hoc the terms were rationalised and made literal, so that most people can now comfortably speak of ‘having’ an unconscious without irony (whereas an ironist might express it as: given the range of descriptions available to me, the metaphor of ‘the unconscious’ is the most useful for my current purposes) (Rorty 1989).

Eventually, Rorty says, some new descriptions are accepted and incorporated into our practices. The descriptions are no longer metaphors, but are literally true or, as Rorty puts it, “dead metaphors” (1989:127). Alain de Botton, in *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, explores the transitory nature of our work practices and wonders if:

The history of technologies should usefully identify not only when a particular innovation was introduced, but also, and more interestingly, when it was forgotten - when it disappeared from collective consciousness through familiarity, becoming as commonplace and unremarkable as a pebble or a cloud. (Botton 2009:210)

De Botton’s point reinforces the Heideggerian observation that our tools (and, as Rorty makes clear, our language-games are tools) eventually become part of our background through familiarity (Flores 2000). In Rorty’s (1979) terms, this is when a particular description moves from unfamiliar (metaphor) to familiar (dead metaphor). In the case of Peter, ‘multi-authoring’ is a metaphor due to its unfamiliarity in the new context in which it is being applied. Even though

both 'multi' and 'authoring' exist as familiar terms, they have not previously been used together.

The challenge for Peter, as it is for any project manager, is the active part a project manager must play in the transition of the new term to familiarity. Rather than waiting for a new description to take hold, a project manager is charged with the responsibility for transition from one kind of description to the next. In the context of 'multi-authoring', this means Peter could not simply observe the process of transition play out, with the possibility of the new tool being rejected completely, but had to engage in the process of bringing the tool into a state of familiarity:

We had to spend a lot of time with some of the staff. They just had so many problems with the new system. It wasn't a functional thing, they knew how it worked, but they just didn't want to use it because it contradicted a particular view they had of their job. We couldn't change the system as such, so we had to change their view, make them realise this way was the way things were going to be and it'd be so much better than it was before.

Peter's challenge here is to proactively enact the kind of change that typically happens by chance. Human languages transform in countless ways over long periods of time. Metaphorical expressions that are initially strange and nonsensical can sometimes catch on and become part of our language, eventually forming part of the familiar background to our practices. At other times the expression is rejected and simply falls away (Rorty 2004). Generally speaking, whether or not a new description gains acceptance is a matter of chance. Given that chance is not a luxury the project manager can typically afford, what alternatives do they have for promoting redescription in their business?

The strong poet is someone who attempts to redescribe language games in a radical way. She¹³ has “radical and continuing doubts” about her final vocabulary and is “worried” about it (Rorty 1989:57). Rather than accept the limitations of the existing vocabulary and therefore the limitations of the world it describes, the strong poet challenges those limitations and seeks to create new descriptions.

Rorty notes the profound impact (for better or for worse) of some recent historical strong poets such as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, who altered the context within which socio-political, moral and psychological discussion took place through their redescrptions (Rorty 2007). Peter’s attempt to alter the perspective of the end-users in his project is analogous to this as he observes “we couldn’t change the system as such, so we had to change their view”. As Rorty puts it, the strong poet views her new way of thinking as something that “ought to be shared by everybody” (1989:111).

Critics of Rorty’s concept of the strong poet have argued that to be “worried” about a final vocabulary implies an objective position. The strong poet must be comparing the current language-game to a potential future language-game against which the existing one fails to measure up, or what could there be to “worry” about? This, the detractors suggest, implies there is, at least in theory, a future meta-language in which all languages could be expressed, thus eliminating the possibility of “worry” (Gutting 1999).

Rorty claims this argument misses the point, for there can be no rationale behind the worry. The strong poet is in the process of creating the language within which the worry may one day make sense and no one can be more aware of the particulars of this future language than anybody else. That it *may* one day make sense is also important. For every strong poet who redescribes a language and invents the terms that we take for granted, there are the countless others that suffer marginalisation and obscurity (Rorty 1989). As

¹³ Rorty uses the feminine term “she” to denote ironists whilst maintaining the masculine pronoun “he” for everyone else.

Peter recounts, challenging the taken-for-granted descriptions that underpin our language games is a fraught task, and one that is frequently not successful:

Initially, we tried to convince people that the new way of working was going to be so much better. We hired an external training group to come and show some of the more reluctant adopters of the new technology exactly what it was capable of. I remember sitting up the back of one of these sessions watching this young guy extol the virtues of the new system, creating new documents with some of his colleagues who were video-conferencing in from other countries. It was very cool. Trouble was, he kept talking about 'old ways' of doing things and kept referring to those ways as 'dinosaur mode'. He said the new multi-authoring tool was the KT event, which was apparently the asteroid that ended the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Not so cool. The feedback after the session was terrible. All the staff felt like they had been insulted.

The trainer's redescription gives Peter the opportunity to reflect on the limitations of attempting to enact change in the manner of a strong poet. Like many strong poets before him, the direct challenge the trainer in Peter's example offered to existing final vocabularies was swiftly rebutted, and the attempted redescription failed. Clearly, the trainer's characterisation of existing practice as dinosaur-mode did not help promote their new description. The anxiety the team were already feeling about the implications of multi-authoring meant that an analogy about the significance of the change was taken as an insult.

Rorty sees this problem as an atypical one, arguing that "most people just want their language game accepted as it is" (1989:87). Whilst significant change in a company is frequently the purpose of a project, recognising the danger of a revolutionary approach to change, typified in the attitude of the strong poet, is a critical element of a virtuoso project management competency. Fortunately, Rorty offers an alternative to the strong poet and a more radical pursuit of change, in the form of the ironic liberal.

8.4 The Project Manager as an Ironic Liberal

The ironic liberal is someone who takes an ironic stance towards our language-games, whilst continuing to live and work productively in the communities to which the languages belong. An ironic liberal is a strong poet who effects change in evolutionary rather than revolutionary terms (Rorty 1989). In the context of project management practice, an ironic liberal practitioner is dedicated to altering the specialist practices of the organisation in order to achieve project objectives, but in ways that recognise the importance of those practices to existing operations.

The difference between the strong poet and the ironic liberal can be seen in the contrast offered between the trainer in Peter's system replacement project and the earlier description of Angelina's efforts to redescribe 'experience' in her supply chain project. Angelina utilised a redescription that was already there. She did not invent it herself but had heard staff talking about 'the experience' and had recognised the possibilities of this new description to create a new way of working. Her efforts had been focused around promoting this new description and allowing it to be taken up by her customers. She did not attempt to *conquer* existing descriptions in the manner of the trainer in Peter's project. As Angelina expressed it:

Supply chain management is not sexy. I don't care what anyone says! But it was a big deal to the people responsible for it. The new system was going to change the way they worked but you just had to keep pointing out that it wasn't going to change how important they were to the company, they were still relevant. "The experience" became their way of talking about it, and because it was theirs, and I kept making clear it was theirs, it wasn't being shoved down their throats by

management, and they felt like they owned the change. It was their baby, I was just the midwife.

Angelina's approach is at odds with formal project management theory in that it deliberately removes the project manager as the central figure of control. Her expression "it was their baby, I was just the midwife" captures the perspective of someone who sees themselves as facilitating a creative function rather than directing a project to fixed goals. Redescription serves this creative function by allowing the project manager to see the alteration of specialist language-games as part of a creative process, rather than a procedural one. Whilst a procedural function dictates outputs, a creative function generally does not.

An example of this is provided by Linde and Linderoth (2006), who developed what they call Actor Network Theory to reduce the emphasis on formal IT-related Project Management techniques. Actor Network Theory opts for a 'fuzzy' programme of action built around a network of actors whose competing visions are not "managed" by the project manager so much as "uncovered" (p.157). Within the theory, the power of the project manager is deliberately "power-drained" in order to allow competing visions of the project goals to emerge (p.163). The goals of the project themselves are not developed during the planning stages, as in normal project management methodology, but are allowed to emerge through the complex interactions of key actors inside and outside the organisation (Linde and Linderoth 2006:155-170).

The role of the project manager in complex, inter-practice interactions is not to impose control, but to facilitate the necessary conversations through an increasingly shared understanding of what the project goals are. Linde and Linderoth (2006) refer to this increasing understanding as a "chain of translation" (p.166–168) that ultimately binds together the technological and organisational change aspects. Understanding and monitoring that chain of translation is the interpretive task of the project manager. The critical factor in the success of such interactions is the strength of character required of the

virtuoso practitioner to allow key actors to emerge and have their voice included in the chain (Linde and Linderoth 2006).

Actor Network Theory stands at odds with formal project management practice. Formal project management theory encourages the initial stakeholder group, once identified, to be contained and divergent attitudes within the organisation to be sidelined. The effect of the formal approach is to drive the creation of alternative programs of action that begin to compete with the primary program, leading to rapid discontinuity, diffusion of the project goals and frequent project failure (Linde and Linderoth 2006).

Alan, the 37-year-old project manager from Melbourne, highlights this aspect of formal project management theory and the pressure to control the conversation in his change project for a multi-national pharmaceutical company:

My managers would keep stressing to me, 'don't include that guy in the stakeholder meeting' or, 'how do we get that guy out, he'll be trouble' but the bottom line is, you know, that we need them. Trying to keep them out of it is difficult enough, but it also creates this immediate core of opposition, an 'us and them' thing, simply because they are not included. It's hard, real hard, but you need to include them and take account of their opinions, even if you disagree, especially if you disagree!

Alan is acknowledging here the necessary inclusion of divergent voices in the "chain of translation" and, in doing so, constraining his own power to control the activities of the program. The "trouble" his managers speak of becomes trouble only when it is given a separate voice from the program. The deliberately excluded voices redefine themselves automatically as a "core of opposition" and the alternative programs of action begin to develop (Raisanen and Linde 2004).

Nonetheless, as Alan's example highlights, any change to existing practices, particularly in the context of a large organisation, can be problematic. The chief obstacle, Rorty argues, to an ironic liberal approach is that such thinking has

rarely been part of mainstream society. The majority of individuals fall into the previously mentioned category of those comfortable with their final vocabularies and they see most, if not all, of the concepts expressed in their practices as literal representations of reality (Rorty 1989).

Attempts by project managers to include contradictory points of view or relinquish control of formal power structures can be viewed as challenges to that reality. For a project manager to begin wholesale adoption of metaphorical terms in their everyday language in order to facilitate the redescriptive process would make them hard to understand, at best, and an outcast, at worst. As already discussed, such a fate is typical of many strong poets who have challenged existing language-games (such as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) and found themselves at odds with the establishment and working on the fringes of their disciplines for most of their professional lives (Rorty 1989). As Alan notes:

I've seen more than one project manager buck the system; you know, try and do something completely different and ignore the existing methods. It could be pretty exciting too. It was fun to work with them because you felt like you were part of something that might change everything. But I rarely saw them succeed. They were too blunt in their criticism of existing systems and they didn't realise the stake people had in them. You either had to get on board with their brave new world, and accept a good chance of failing with them, or keep to the same way of doing things, and at least then you wouldn't be alone!

The problem for the liberal ironic project manager is that they must find a way to avoid the excesses of the revolutionary language of the strong poet whilst remaining committed to the same ultimate goal, which is the transformation of their business practices through the redescription of the language games that circumscribe them.

The ironic liberal tries to avoid the fate of the strong poet by adopting what Rorty calls the *public/private split*. As in Peter's example of trying to implement 'multi-authoring' practices, the strong poet forces their new language onto existing practices, leaving others to join them or stand in opposition. An ironic liberal, however, is more circumspect, choosing to entertain in private what they may, or may not, apply in public (Rorty 1989).

In private, an ironic liberal will entertain any range of new descriptions. She will play, as Rorty puts it, with new and interesting metaphors and attempt to weave them into the fabric of her existing practices. She will seek these metaphors out in art, poetry, literature, philosophy, and in the practices of other disciplines such as architecture, law and science. She will not, however, immediately apply them in practice. Unlike the strong poet she does not directly challenge the practice within which she operates. She recognises that ultimately all her fellow practitioners will need to adopt the new descriptions for there to be any fundamental change (Rorty 2007), as Angelina recalls in the context of dealing with changes introduced by her own project:

You have to be really cautious about how you approach change, you've got to understand what it is you are really changing. It's not just a system but the way people work and that is part of their identity. I'm always thinking of new ways to approach the problem of getting these systems deployed but I would sure not discuss them all with the customer! You need a space to brainstorm the changes you are proposing, figure out the best way of talking about them, even if that is your own head.

Angelina demonstrates here the activity of the ironic liberal project manager utilising their private sphere (i.e. "your own head") for entertaining options they would not immediately present to a customer. Critics of the public/private split point to the idea of thinking one thing and saying another as inherently dangerous for a number of reasons. Broadly speaking, those reasons can be broken into three areas: the psychological, the ethical and the existential. Due

to the importance of the concept of the public/private split to a virtuoso competency of project management, it is important to address each of these areas in turn.

In the psychological area, Collier (1994) asks how it would be possible to sustain a public/private split without serious implications for our psychological health. The concern is that we would eventually be unable to distinguish between our private thoughts and our public utterances, a situation Collier characterises as the equivalent of psychosis. Rorty responds by noting that, to a degree, we all have thoughts we prohibit ourselves from saying in public, and the distinction between what we say and what we choose not to say is one hallmark of a properly socialised human being (Rorty 2006). A situation in which an individual is unable to distinguish between thoughts privately held and public utterances would certainly seem to indicate some kind of problem, but to suggest we would necessarily arrive there by thinking thoughts we aren't prepared to share seems unfounded (Rorty 2006). Angelina echoes this sentiment when describing her thoughts when away from the rest of her project team:

I don't think there is any such thing as a bad thought. It's just a thought and sometimes you just have to let your imagination go wild and think crazy and really, really bad things. At one point things got so frustrating with my team I was imagining firing them all and starting again. Stupid, really, but just thinking about that got me to wondering why I couldn't do it.

Angelina's observation directs us towards the ethical criticism of the public/private split, which rests on the implications of how a public/private split appears to allow for certain attitudes in public which are then disregarded in private (Taylor 2003). An example that Rorty himself provides is the family values politician who beats his wife behind closed doors. The mistake in this criticism, argues Rorty, lies in what is conceived of as 'private'. A closed door is not private if you are beating your wife behind it. Domestic abuse is a public

issue. The frontier of private for Rorty is essentially “what we do with our solitude” (1989:95). Only actions that affect other people are, by definition, public. Even if dangerous fantasies of an anti-social nature are entertained in solitary moments, it is difficult to sustain a criticism of having them that does not involve the policing of thoughts (Rorty 2006). Instead, Rorty suggests the ability to redescribe in ways that might initially seem abhorrent is actually the source of our moral imagination (Frazier 2006).

In Rorty’s view it is necessary to maintain a clear distinction between the public and private domains of morality, with our existing forms of government and institutions providing (for better or for worse) the necessary public space within which individuals can grapple with their moral problems (Guignon and Riley 2003). As for the private domain, this remains the space within which individuals are free to play with the boundaries of their language games, unencumbered by the limitations of public morality. As Angelina’s example attests, this is the space in which creative solutions frequently emerge:

Thinking about that [firing her team] made me realise what I wanted was a clean start. I wasn’t actually going to fire them all, they were all pretty good people and we had just dug ourselves into a bit of a hole. But we needed to freshen up and get a new perspective. So in the middle of our project I declared ‘Day One’, we reset our project count board and had a kick-off meeting. The whole bit. It was brilliant, really electric. We got that feeling you have at the start of a project again.

Whilst it would appear difficult to sustain a psychological or ethical argument against the public/private split, MacIntyre offers a third, existential argument, based around the implications of the public/private split for our personal identity (MacIntyre 1998b). MacIntyre argues that splitting our language into a project of individual self-creation on the one side, and a socially conforming individual on the other, serves to rupture the very concept of cohesion we are seeking to achieve when we describe our practices. The public/private split,

thinks Macintyre, is a tool for “evasion” between people who “share the same moral vocabulary” (1998a:178).

Macintyre argues that by limiting our moral thinking to a private fantasy realm, we cannot test the validity of our morality in everyday situations. The cohesion of our practices is only achievable within a social context that utilises commensurable terms for explicating moral behaviour. Macintyre refers to this context as a “tradition”, and it is this over-arching tradition that an ironic liberal lacks (MacIntyre 1984:244-255). Macintyre argues that without the guiding framework of a tradition, Rorty’s ironic liberal is left in the self-contradictory position of engaging in a project of self-creation that paradoxically defines them as beings in a project of self-creation (Gutting 1999).

As Gutting (1999) identifies, however, if all expression is aimed at social cohesion around commensurable terms in the context of a tradition, what mechanism is carried within our language for the alteration of values, ideals or beliefs? Whilst Macintyre’s position certainly enhances the possibility of unity in our practices, it also severely limits the possibility of changes to that practice.

Gutting (1999) sees the unified ‘tradition’ outlined by Macintyre as imperilled by an intrinsic tension between two general demands of a human language. The first is the demand for the “absolute acceptance of the fundamental truths of the tradition” (p.88) lest the tradition loses the necessary power to ensure cohesion. The second demand is that traditions constantly challenge the objective truths on which the tradition is established in order to accommodate changing environmental circumstances. As Gutting sees it, the Macintyrean objection to ironic liberalism acknowledges the first demand whilst failing to accept the necessity of the second (Gutting 1999:88-91).

The public/private split is necessary, as Rorty sees it, to overcome the tension between the need for relative stability in our specialist practices and the need for imaginative responses to problems in these practices. The attempt to deal with both in the same frame of reference is a faint hope (Rorty 1989). Specialist practices requires that a certain prior standard is maintained through the

deployment of existing, well-understood terms or the idea of right or wrong in the practice becomes fractured. The result of this fracturing would be that ordinary day-to-day activity become impossible, as no one can agree on the correct way of doing anything (Rorty 1999).

Alternatively, when a change to a practice is required, such as that brought about in the context of projects, well-understood terms offer nothing new to our existing interpretations. From Rorty's point of view, juxtaposition, disruption and unfamiliarity are the staple of the creative process, and a practice that does not allow for these remains trapped in a kind of stasis, as it would be in Macintyre's concept of the tradition (Rorty 1989).

Rorty views language as a tool, the purpose of which is to "practically cope" with the vagaries of reality by providing useful descriptions of it in order to get what we want (1989:54). This stands at odds with a concept of language as corresponding to reality. A language that corresponds with reality can be seen as stable and unchanging. What a stable language implies is a stable reality. Our reality, though, is not stable. As our reality alters through the effects of changes brought about by such things as weather patterns, population growth, migration, disease, ageing and war, so our language is required to adapt (Rorty 1989). Projects are created in business setting to directly address such alterations in our reality. Instead of war and disease, the challenges to reality in a contemporary business are typically based around market competition. Market competition demands that a company adapts, and the languages of the multiple practices within the company are challenged to adapt with it (Watson 1982).

An example of such a challenge is provided by Peter in the context of the IT project he was managing. He describes a conversation during his project in which he is attempting to upgrade an existing IT management system for an airline. Market pressure in the form of a worldwide increase in fuel costs had forced the airline to put austerity measures in place. As a result, Peter's project was created to move the bulk of the airline's data processing to a third-party

hosted data-centre. The anticipated reduction in data processing costs from this move was expected to be significant. As Peter recounts, one result of this project was that it took away the need for significant capacity planning effort in the airline's infrastructure team:

This created a huge drama for them. Everything they understood and practised for the last 20 years was under threat. All these intricate capacity planning forecasts they'd developed were pretty much useless now. The off-site vendor had some very powerful algorithms that predicted future capacity requirements across everything and just automatically upgraded it. I mean, like, every hour. It would have taken months for these guys to figure that out and we would have been paying for capacity we didn't need in the meantime.

In the microcosm of IT operations at the airline where Peter was working, the specialist language-game that described the practices of the capacity planning team was called ITIL (Information Technology Infrastructure Library) (ITIL 2008). As a practice, ITIL shares its origins with the Prince2 project management framework, both practices being drafted within the UK Government before finding wider application in the corporate sector. The ITIL framework purports to define a set of procedures for managing the IT infrastructure within any medium to large organisation and, like its cousin, the Prince2 framework, has become the de facto universal standard for IT operations (Lloyd and Rudd 2007).

As Gellner (1978) points out, though, "every language has its opportunity cost" (p.76) and its terms will allow us to deal effectively with some aspects of reality but not others. For example, the language of spirituality is of little use in predicting the orbit of the planets, whilst the language of science has proven less than useful in constructing a moral life (Gellner 1978:76). The opportunity cost of the ITIL-based specialist language of the capacity planning team at the airline was its inability to articulate a working environment in which capacity planning was redundant. The need for traditional capacity planning had been

removed by the market innovation of consumer driven demand and technology commoditisation. As Rorty makes clear, language-games are ephemeral at best, and the idea that there is a single language-game that could encompass all our possible reactions to the natural world constitutes, for Rorty, a dangerous illusion (Rorty 1999). As Peter goes on to describe:

I really felt for them 'cause I could see how hard it was for them to even get their heads around what was happening. Hell, I was struggling with it! This new model was challenging stuff that had been fundamental to all of us for so long. Capacity planning was always at the centre of IT operations. If you got that right, all other systems tended to work. One of them said their job was like making sure you had the right mix of concrete in a building. It was substantive, you know, not something you can do without.

The dissonance experienced by the capacity planning team echoes the dissonance I experienced as a project manager and which was outlined in the discussion on methodology in Chapter 3. The language of project management practice was not, to me, an arbitrary set of descriptions open to re-interpretation, but something deeply anchored in the practice. It was through disruption to my practice that I was forced to confront the failure of my practice to provide me with the language to practically cope with the reality of managing projects in the contemporary corporate sector. In doing so, it became clear to me that the terms of my practice were not objectively anchored to reality, but rather arrived at through consensus.

It is on the point of consensus that Macintyre criticises the process of redescription by asking: If all language is arrived at by consensus, how can there be any distinction between objective knowledge and subjective belief? (Macintyre 1988) Macintyre claims that, to an ironist practising redescription, any expression in language is only the expression of an individual preference. This, he argues, has close interdependencies with the aesthetic ideals of the aristocratic elite, who see the world simply as an environment in which to

express preferences and manipulate others. The mode of morality open to this world-view is essentially an arbitrary one. An expression in language unaligned to a particular principle or value must necessarily precede any conceptual framework of morality, and therefore fall outside of any social or historical framework (MacIntyre 1984).

Rorty's answer to MacIntyre's charge is to deny a clear distinction in our language-games between objective knowledge and subjective belief. He observes that what we consider to be objective knowledge is merely inter-subjective belief (Gutting 1999). To begin with, the ironist is far from arbitrary in her preferences. She is, to quote Heidegger, "always already" within a particular language-game, and it is against the vicissitudes, vagaries and contingencies of that language-game she is reacting (Heidegger 1996). As already pointed out, all new descriptions introduced to a language-game are necessarily parasitic on existing descriptions. Accordingly, all new expressions of objective knowledge are but redescriptions of existing ones. They are not invented out of thin air, but out of a questioning by individuals for whom the existing language-game may not be working (Rorty 1989).

In the case of the capacity planning team, the reality of the IT environment had changed, with new technologies rendering the existing descriptions within their specialist language-game unviable. The descriptions that ITIL provided them no longer allowed them to practically cope with their new reality. Unfortunately for the capacity planning team, Peter was unable to provide a redescription that made the new scheme work for them. As such, they remained in a defensive way of being, idealising the 'old way' of doing things and claiming its objective foundation in reality as the reason for doing so (Segal 1999):

I couldn't find any common ground with them [the capacity planning team] in the end. They thought everything we were going to do in terms of the new system was wrong and it'd fail because it broke all the rules we had. I tried to explain that the rules were changing and we needed to change our game to suit but they just couldn't see it that way. Their

rules were just, I don't know, the way things were, I guess. So they did their very best to derail the whole program. Refused to provide information, wouldn't get involved in any of the testing, just absolutely made my life a nightmare. And they didn't help themselves much either. If they had gotten on board there might have been a chance of finding a new job but senior management were heartily sick of them and the whole team just went. I'm not saying it would have made a difference but it sure as hell didn't help them...

What Rorty's philosophical hermeneutic of redescription tries to provide, within an ironic liberal way of being, is a process by which our language-games can alter that does not include the wholesale disruption and/or rejection of existing norms. When that happens, to Rorty's way of thinking, violence and cruelty inevitably follow (Rorty 1999). What critics of Rorty frequently forget is that redescription is not the catalyst for change, but is a means by which to respond to, and practically cope with, the inevitable changes that are already occurring in the world around us. Redescription requires the complicity of the language-game users for the redescription to ultimately succeed (Rorty 1989).

The project manager may deploy new metaphors in order to generate a shift in the descriptions of a language-game, but unless those descriptions are eventually adopted by the specialist practice to which the language-game belongs, they will disappear. In Angelina's organisation, the broader work community found a use for the metaphorical innovation of 'the experience' that helped them redescribe their practices and deal with their changing reality. Peter's capacity planning team, by contrast, accepted no such redescription and remained within their final vocabulary, convinced that its apparent correspondence to reality would save it from extinction.

What determines the success of a new description in becoming part of our language-game, and therefore our practices and our beliefs, is not the description's apparently 'better' correspondence with either the natural world, divine revelation or the musings of our 'inner voice', but its sheer usefulness in

dealing with the situations we find ourselves in. The usefulness of the description is determined by how well it integrates with already established terms and whether it provide us with more interesting ways of thinking of ourselves (Rorty 1989). In the Darwinian scheme that Rorty borrows, the only metaphors that survive to become truths are the ones that have proved themselves most useful in our practices for dealing with our reality (Rorty 1982:150-166).

Interestingly, even though the capacity planning team in Peter's account rejected the redescription, the remainder of the business eventually accepted it. This demonstrates the way in which language-games change over time, and how it can do so in random, seemingly chaotic ways. It was not the correspondence of the terms to reality, as the capacity planning team claimed, that determined the success of the new description. What determined its success was how useful the broader corporation found it, and how easily it could be made part of existing descriptions.

8.5 Chapter Summary

The distinction between the approaches of the strong poet and the ironic liberal for a 'way of being' in project management practice hinges on Macintyre's theory of practice and the relationship between the practice and the institution. In any professional practice there can be a conflict between the needs of the practice and the needs of the institution that supports it. In the practice of project management (at least in a contemporary, for-profit business) the practice of project management exists for the purpose of realising the broader, external aims of the institution that support it, as well as for the purpose of promoting the internal aims of the practice.

By contrasting the revolutionary approach of the strong poet and the evolutionary approach of the ironic liberal, the case was made for ironic liberalism as a more effective approach in the context of project management.

Through the mechanism of the public/private split, the ironic liberal project manager is able to utilise their solitude for the creative task of redescribing their project environment in new and innovative ways, applying such descriptions when and if the opportunity arises for them to do so without unnecessary conflict. Such an approach allows the ironic liberal project manager to remain committed to the aims of their practice and the broader institution their practice serves whilst at the same time recognising the contingency and malleability of the language-games they use to achieve those aims. This grants the virtuoso project manager the opportunity to seek change where feasible whilst avoiding the marginalisation that frequently accompanies a more revolutionary approach.

Chapter 9 – Conclusion: Making Project Management Relevant

9.1 Summary of the Research

When I began my thesis journey nearly eight years ago, it was against a background of deep anxiety about my role as a project manager. My failure to deliver a number of large projects for which I was responsible had led me to question not just my ability as a project manager, but the practice of project management itself. What was project management? If project management was faithfully executing a pre-established method then I had done that, and yet still failed. It seemed the training I had received in project management theory was not arming me with the necessary tools to successfully deliver projects. More than that, it also seemed as if there was a problem with the practice of project management itself. It was not just a question of more tools, more method, more procedure, but more a question of how the practice was actually conceived.

The questioning of my practice as a project manager led me to the central argument of this dissertation: that the existing theory of project management practice is conceived as a procedural, quasi-scientific practice based on prediction and analysis, whereas it is actually practised as an interpretive discipline based in the negotiation between multiple specialist languages. It was in the space of this disconnect between the *theory* of project management and the *practice* of project management that my thesis has operated. I have argued that the high and increasing rate of failure of projects in the corporate sector over the last 50 years has been largely due to this distance between theory and practice.

My initial research into the origins of contemporary project management theory surprised me. As a practitioner, it was all too easy to accept the theory of project management as we were taught at university and in training courses as *the* theory of project management, because that was how it was presented. There was no sense of the history of the practice in what we were taught.

Project management theory as articulated in modern standards such as PMBoK and Prince-2 were Platonic in the sense that they present project management as an abstract, a-temporal and universal construct. In the same way Plato conceived of the forms as realising the perfect state of material things, formal project management theory was presented to us as the perfect way of managing projects.

The problem with this approach, and the source of my anxiety as a project manager, was that the reality of project management was far from perfect. No sooner did I articulate on paper my perfect requirements, establish my perfect plans and develop my perfect schedules, than they began to be destroyed. Far from the perfect linearity of the process diagram or the schedules that we were taught, what remained was messy, indeterminate and chaotic. It was as if the theory of project management did not describe the practice of project management. The answer, so obvious to me after the fact, was that it didn't. Formal project management theory failed to describe the actual practice of project management because it was not *derived* from practice. Rather, it was a rational construct *imposed* on practice.

The genealogy of project management conducted in this dissertation revealed how this state of affairs came about. The massive Apollo and Polaris submarine programs of the 1950s and 1960s generated a large group of individuals trained in the use of Gantt schedules and the Program Evaluation and Review technique (PERT). It was this group of people that sought to professionalise under the broad banner of project management, when in fact they were largely dedicated to a very narrow range of methods built around a number of specific tools dedicated to the management of time. Gantt charts, and the PERT technique derived from them, owed their existence to the efforts of Taylor and the scientific method of the early 20th century. Paradoxically, whilst the rest of management theory moved on from Taylorism and the idea that work activity could be conceived in the nature of a machine, it enjoyed a rebirth in contemporary project management theory.

This rebirth was due to the co-incidence of the technology revolution of the 1960s and the ability, courtesy of the computer, to actually use a sophisticated tool such as the Gantt chart for the first time. The incredible complexity of the interactions produced by such techniques demanded the kind of processing only a computer could provide. It is ironic, then, that the projects to which such techniques were applied during the 1960s experienced massive time and cost overruns, and such overruns have continued in projects to this day. The fundamental understanding that arose out of this dissertation is that the formal methods of project management theory, and the techniques that support them, have been applied to projects because they *can* be, and not because they are the most appropriate methods for the task.

So pervasive is the contemporary view of project management theory that even researchers into ancient projects make the mistake of thinking that projects were managed in the same way as they are now. Yet, if one considers the tools around which existing theory has been built, this could not be the case. Ours is a particularly modern approach to project management, and has existed for only 50 years or so. If we assume that projects of the past were managed differently, how were they managed? What tools did they use to manage budget, time and quality? How did they manage their stakeholders and, most importantly, how did project managers in the past conceive of themselves as project managers?

It was questions such as these from my early research, allied to my anxiety about my practice as a project manager, that led to the method for my data gathering. I wanted to move past the imposed rational construct of project management theory to a view of project management that was based in its practice. Not all projects failed. I had delivered some successfully myself and had many colleagues that had done so successfully as well. How did we do it? If the techniques of existing project management were so limited, then what techniques did my colleagues and I use to actually deliver them? I found it strange that I could not answer those questions, either to myself or to my colleagues.

9.2 The Key Findings of this Dissertation

The fundamental question this research has sought to answer is: What does a successful project management practitioner look like? What competencies do they exhibit? The concept of the *virtuoso* was utilised to describe project managers who had transcended the limitations of project management theory and were operating in a different kind of practice. Through an enquiry into their day-to-day activities, it was demonstrated that virtuoso project managers *use* project management theory, rather than have project management theory *use them*. The virtuoso's approach to practice is not one of a theory defining the practice, but of a practice utilising theory, of which the PMBoK or Prince-2 are amongst many.

The way in which I sought to describe virtuoso project management practices was a critical factor in my dissertation. As pointed out, much of existing research into project management practice assumes the theory and then describes the practice from within that point of view. To avoid making the same mistake, a method was needed that could capture the experience of project management as it was actually lived by the practitioner rather than how it was theorised. This would allow the generation of descriptions of project management practice that were not constrained by theoretical models, but were emblematic of the way projects were actually managed.

By choosing a phenomenological method based on embodied research, descriptions of practice that are grounded in the actual rather than the theoretical have been articulated. This is the core of the research and its major contribution to professional knowledge. What this research has demonstrated is that virtuoso project managers are not well described by the analytic and scientific archetype that has been at the foundation of contemporary project management theory since its inception. Instead, a description has been developed of the project manager that has as its archetype an ironist, a person for whom all descriptions are open to constant change and negotiation. An ironist believes that "anything", as Richard Rorty puts it, "can be made to look

good or bad by being redescribed" (1979:381). An ironist relies on a hermeneutic process rather than a scientific one. The differences between these two points of view are fundamental, and they have significant implications for project management practice.

The first of these implications is for the way project management as a profession treats 'failure'. It was failure that led to my dissertation. The difficulty lay in the relationship between the failure of the projects I managed in terms of the 'iron triangle' of time cost and performance, and my failure as a project manager. How did the two equate? In the contemporary theory of project management there was no distinction. The failure of the project is the failure of the project manager. The problem, as this research has realised, is that there is no place for the project manager in contemporary project management theory. Project management theory, as demonstrated in the genealogy, is by and large a theory of the project. The project *manager* goes unmentioned, and their existence is implied in the execution of the processes and procedures that the theory describes.

In order to articulate a practice of project management as opposed to a theory, it was necessary to begin with the practitioners themselves. What this dissertation has done is bring the project manager to the foreground of practice and develop a practitioner-centric view of practice rather than a theory-centric one. A focus on the practitioner has allowed a far richer range of methods to be brought to bear on the problem of project management. Methods such as genealogy, phenomenology and hermeneutics allow for different kinds of questions to be asked.

The practitioner's experience of failure represents a profound disruption to the contemporary model of a practice based on theory. It is through the experience of failure that practitioners come to question their practice, by asking: How can I consider myself a successful project manager if the project has failed? This question is not possible within the existing model of practice, so to be asking it implies a questioning of practice itself. Disruption through failure became the

starting point of enquiry for this research. The assumption of the virtuoso practitioner was that if they had transcended the theoretical model of project management practice, then at some point they had been forced to question it through their failure. What form had that questioning taken, what insights had it generated, and what implications did it ultimately have for the way they went about their work?

The most significant insight developed through the research interviews was the attitude of the virtuoso practitioner towards the specialist languages of the companies in which they worked, but especially their own. Disruption had at some point led each of them to an examination of the language of their practice, a language defined by the theory of project management. What each had in common was the form that examination took, namely, a deeply critical view of what project management theory was and, more importantly, what it was good *for*. As a result of disruption, they had each begun to see the language of project management from a largely pragmatic point of view. It was useful in some circumstances, but not others. The natural extension of this attitude was that project management theory was not a description of their practice at all, but a set of linguistic tools from which they could draw to help promote a particular point of view or achieve a particular goal.

Through an awareness of the contingent nature of such concepts as truth and value in the context of specialist language-games, the virtuoso project manager had freed themselves from the limitations of the over-arching meta-language of formal project management. They were now in a position to begin negotiating the byzantine pathways of truth and power such language games enabled. Rather than attempt to legitimate one language-game over another, a virtuoso project manager gives space to each of the languages in play and creates shared meanings between project stakeholders. By refusing to allow any particular language-game to achieve dominance in the space of the project, the virtuoso project manager ensures that no discordant voices are marginalised, and their potentially fruitful avenues of exploration prematurely shutdown (Linde and Linderöth 2006).

The highly contingent view of language displayed by the interviewees was well articulated by the work of Richard Rorty. Rorty's view of all languages as 'games' resonated with the descriptions of practice the interviewees were providing. Rorty's examination of the history of philosophy had identified a significant problem: a confusion of a description of the world with the world itself. In the context of philosophy Rorty called it "the mirror of nature", and saw a large swathe of philosophical activity of the last 2,500 years as being devoted to generating theories that perfectly described the way nature 'was' (Rorty 1979). This same problem is manifest in project management theory. It attempts to describe a perfect world that does not exist. The efforts of project managers to utilise such a theory on the mistaken assumption that it does exist is at the heart of project failure.

What separates the virtuoso project manager from the competent performer is what they do with the understanding their individual disruption provides. In transcending the limitations of project management theory the virtuoso opens themselves up to an enormous range of possibilities in terms of how they can approach the multitude of scenarios that confront the typical project. By taking Rorty's general theory of language and applying it to the specific domain of project management practice, this research has provided a thematic structure for a set of virtuoso competencies. Each of these competencies is built around the experience of the virtuoso as they move through different aspects of managing projects.

The central theme around which these virtuoso competencies were organised is what Rorty calls redescription. Redescription provides the virtuoso project manager with a powerful tool for getting what they want. The ironic disposition implicit in the utilisation of redescription allows the virtuoso project manager to see the language-games of all specialist practices as useful descriptions for getting things done, but no more than that. They are 'games' in the sense that the terms of the language have power because their meaning is agreed upon, and not because the term in some way adheres to reality. This understanding

provides the virtuoso project manager with the opportunity to play with the language games and thus change the meaning of the terms within them.

What was significant in the virtuoso project managers' utilisation of disruption, and something that sets them apart from less skilled formal project practitioners, is that there was no way they could know in advance how that disruption would play out, *and they accepted it*. Not only did they accept it, they realised the creative process of the project was, by necessity, a leap into the unknown. The principal assumption of the linear model of formal project management practice is that the output of the project is agreed in advance. It is the function of the project in the linear model to deliver that agreed output. In moving beyond the linear model, the virtuoso practitioner adopts an ironic stance, recognises the creative journey they are on, and utilises redescription to generate creative outcomes. Those outcomes are not knowable in advance, but can only be realised through the project.

The model of the project presented to us by the experience of the virtuoso practitioner is of a tool for generating disruption in professional practices, but *doing so in an evolutionary as opposed to a revolutionary way*. This was a significant finding of the research, and has important implications for the way a project manager conducts themselves in their practice. Unlike traditional professional competencies, which separate the 'practitioner' and 'knowledge of practice', philosophical hermeneutics makes no such distinction, but instead views knowledge as inextricably linked to a project manager's 'way of being' in their practice. An understanding of who they are as individual practitioners therefore becomes a critical aspect of a project manager's ability to effectively manage their work.

The research offered a contrast between two different kinds of practitioner that help us understand the implications of a 'way of being' in project management practice. The revolutionary practitioner is one dedicated to radical change and is comfortable altering existing language games to accomplish their goals. The ironic liberal project manager, whilst still employing the same stance towards

the contingency of their specialist language-games, does not attempt to force disruption. Rather they seek to identify disruptions as they occur and facilitate, amplify and otherwise enable their progression from ripples in a company's awareness to a deeper meaning on which they all stakeholders can eventually agree.

The approach of the ironic liberal project manager respects the fundamental terms of language on which work practices are based. If those terms were to lose their meaning then the practice would be thrown into disruption. The reason why it is imperative to identify such terms within a practice is that it allows the virtuoso project manager to avoid directly challenging them. The marginalisation that invariably arises from such provocative manipulation of language can be problematic for project managers with the responsibility of delivering projects in large corporations.

The virtuoso practitioner should therefore strive to become as familiar as possible with the language-games that constitute the practices in the companies in which they operate. Whilst both the revolutionary and evolutionary practitioner requires a nuanced appreciation of the culture in which they work, an evolutionary approach requires a greater degree of involvement in the day to-day activities of the project. It is only through such immersion that an evolutionary project manager can pick up on the subtle shifts in language that will provide the opportunities for creation and change. By contrast, the revolutionary project manager will tend to be a more isolated figure, looking for opportunities to impose their own, newly invented language-game on the situations in which they find themselves. However, the failure of such terms to resonate with the project stakeholders will invariably result in the failure of the project to achieve all its objectives.

There are profound differences between the practice developed in this dissertation and a practice based in formal project management theory. Formal project management theory has no concept of different languages. It treats the contemporary corporate sector and the companies within them as a unified

whole in which all the participants know and understand the terms of project management and, most importantly, *agree to see the project in those terms*. The effect of this assumption has been to marginalise the remaining specialist practices of the organisation by making them subservient to the over-arching project meta-language. This has significantly contributed to the high failure rate of projects. This contribution has rarely been identified in traditional research methods due to the implicit assumption of the universality of project management theory.

Within a virtuoso competency of project management practice, the concept of 'other' practices begins to fall away. All practices become variations on a theme, and that theme is simply the way a particular group of people agree to talk about certain things in order to get them done. The virtuoso learns to engage with those groups in order to understand those ways of getting things done. A project is ultimately aimed at changing the way a company operates via its work practices. The purpose in a practitioner understanding those practices is to distinguish between which aspects are fundamental to the way a practice operates, and those aspects that are open to possible change.

The distinction between what might be called core and non-core aspects of practice emerged as a critical competency of the virtuoso. Rorty's concept of the final vocabulary helped to define core aspects of practice as those linguistic terms of practice, which, as far as the members of the practice are concerned, remain wedded to reality. By acknowledging those terms, the virtuoso practitioner is able to navigate a path around them, working to change what they can and avoiding what they can't. Such a nuanced understanding of the way a company actually changes is unavailable to a theory of project management that sees change in procedural and analytical rather than socio-linguistic terms.

9.3 Implications of the Research

The research has raised a number of questions and, in particular, the implications for virtuoso competencies in the context of training and education. Are virtuoso competencies able to be taught? Virtuoso competencies of the kind demonstrated by the research were not based in knowledge *of* (episteme) or knowledge *how* (techne), which are the traditional forms of project management training and education. They are instead clearly examples of practical wisdom or *phronesis*. As outlined in the introduction, it is the shared aim of phronesis that binds the various research methods of this dissertation together.

Not every project manager, of course, will want to write a dissertation reflecting on his or her failure. What appears critical is that they do, in some way, reflect. In this regard formal project management training and education would appear to offer little value to the proficient performer. Training that reinforces existing project management theory constitutes the defensive response about which Segal (1999) warned us. In the face of disruption, no amount of knowledge about existing practices will assist the practitioner, as it is the practice itself that is in question. Failure has emerged from the research as the generative condition for virtuoso competencies, and this implies a deep engagement with practice that cannot be obtained in the classroom or textbooks. What the classroom and textbooks can provide the engaged practitioner are the tools for reflection.

As I noted in the introduction, the high and increasing failure rate of projects comes despite considerable efforts from the project management community in the professionalisation of our practice, as indicated by the growing membership of the various organisations dedicated to the promotion of project management (Cicmil and Hodgson 2006a). Organisations such as the Project Management Institute (US), the Association of Project Management (UK), the Australian Institute of Project Management (to which I belong) and similar organisations in most other developed countries are a testament to the efforts of the project

management community to develop our practice (Crawford, Morris, Thomas and Winter 2006). The Project Management Institute alone boasts over 600,000 members in over 185 countries.¹⁴

Unfortunately, a side effect of this professionalisation has been the reification of a relatively small set of techniques into a 'body of knowledge', against which it has been difficult to argue or transcend. Whilst the 4th Edition of the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK 2008) acknowledges that the methods and practices outlined within it apply only "to most projects most of the time" (p.4) there is still little in the way of discussion of what other methods or practices could be applied or, indeed, what the implications are for a practice where such a caveat constitutes an opening statement in its professional guide.

The PMBOK does acknowledge in its latest edition what it calls "application area extensions" which reflect "unique or unusual aspects of the project environment of which the project management team must be aware, in order to manage the project efficiently and effectively" (p.403–405). The PMBOK further acknowledges that these "unique or unusual" aspects of knowledge "can arise as a result of many factors, including, but not limited to, differences in cultural norms, technical terminology, societal impact, or project life cycles". It then goes on to list a variety of examples including bioscience, government contracting, and consulting as possible areas that might include such "unique or unusual" properties (p.403–405).

As I argued above, it is a distinguishing characteristic of project management practice that each and every project is essentially a "unique or unusual" undertaking. Indeed, this understanding is incorporated in the definition of a project within the PMBOK itself, which states "a project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a *unique* product, service or result" (p.5). The logical issue at the heart of formal project management theory (or at least as

¹⁴ Project Management Institute website: <http://www.pmi.org/aboutus/Pages/Default.aspx>

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explicated by the PMBOK) can therefore be summarised as an attempt to resolve *unique* problems with a *common* solution or, in the vernacular: one size fits all.

The clearest recommendation for practice that I can make as an outcome of my dissertation is for project management practice to be reconsidered as a professional 'way of being' rather than the application of a range of analytical techniques or the execution of a set of standard processes. A practice should not seek to define itself by the tools at its disposal, but rather the purposes to which such tools are put. The methods, tools and techniques of the practice should therefore be expanded upon indefinitely to encompass whatever is necessary to achieve the purposes of the practice. I have advocated one such tool in the form of redescription, and have provided evidence of the way in which skilled project managers can utilise such tools to improve their chances of successfully delivering projects.

9.4 Future Research Directions

As outlined in the introduction, the qualitative approach to this dissertation was inspired by my reading of research into Australia's convict and military past by the historians Robert Hughes and Bill Gammage. Whilst the qualitative research tradition, and in particular those methods utilising first-person narratives, are well established in the social sciences, they are far less prevalent in the field of management studies, and even less so in the specific area of project management. Why this should be the case is not altogether difficult to understand. In terms of the private sector there can frequently be legal constraints that affect the ability of respondents to participate in such research. Legal instruments such as non-disclosure agreements are frequently invoked to prevent employees talking about their work. In the case of my dissertation, a number of the project managers interviewed were unable to talk about existing projects but were comfortable to do so with regards to previous ones.

To this extent corporations remain, if not altogether hostile, then certainly cautious towards outside researchers. There is also the issue of benefit to the corporations in the event that they do allow employees to participate. As already discussed, there is a presumption of success in the corporate sector, and any research without clearly defined parameters of success will be greeted with suspicion. For qualitative researchers seeking to uncover issues of meaning and identity within the working lives of people, a positive cost/benefits analysis can be difficult to construct. To this end, however, the role of professional societies is invaluable. Without the same market drivers as private corporations, institutions such as the Australian Institute of Project Management and the Project Management Institute are far more amenable to approaches to their members and will frequently consider active participation in any research that has potential outcomes for their members, even if indirectly. Whilst I did not need to take advantage of professional institutions to arrange interviewees due to a large personal network of project management colleagues, professional societies are recommended as a first point of call for any future researchers.

9.5 Concluding Remarks

This thesis has sought to make explicit a philosophical hermeneutic approach of redescription for the practice of project management by basing it in the lived experience of project managers. By advocating the redescription of specialist practices as the aim of project management, I have sought to re-invigorate project management as a discipline. I argue that such a re-invigoration is possible, desirable and, indeed, necessary, for project management practice to remain relevant in the contemporary corporate sector.

By positioning project management as a practice that is situated, contingent and imbued with meaning I have sought to take it beyond the execution of a set of processes and procedures. The virtuoso project manager embodies the practitioner who can operate in the midst of the uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity that defines the modern corporate sector. They can operate between

the spaces of the specialist practices and their language-games, constantly negotiating the meaning of the terms that define those practices. In doing so their purpose is not to settle on terms that are 'true' or 'correct' in some way, but on terms that enable them to deliver the project successfully.

I have had the pleasure of working with a great many project managers over the years and, in putting forward the arguments in this dissertation, my intent has not been to disparage the efforts of a group of people who are increasingly becoming the principal agents for change and innovation in the corporations for which they work. My critique has been aimed squarely at the tools of our project management craft, and the relationship of those tools to the way in which project managers view themselves as practitioners. What my research aimed to achieve was a more expansive view of what it means to be a project manager, and to play a small part in contributing to what I believe to be an honourable and worthwhile profession.

Postscript

This final section of my dissertation aims to complete the “cyclical process of learning” described in the introduction. As described, the process of learning in the practice dissertation involved (a) a consideration of the practitioner’s role (b) a literature review of the relevant themes (c) the relation of the literature to actual practice and (d) the modification of practices as a result of the learning (Crawford, Morris, Thomas and Winter 2006:728). The following is my reflection on the changes that occurred in my practices as a result of this dissertation.

It took me nearly eight years to complete this dissertation as a part-time student. Throughout that period I continued to work full-time in the corporate sector as a freelance IT project manager. During that time I was frequently asked by friends and colleagues whether I found such a lengthy piece of writing and research to be a burden. Surely, they suggested, the last thing you want when you get home from work is to think about it more! I assured them that wasn't the case. On the contrary, I had found my research to be a constant source of alleviation from the pressures of work. Not in the same sense that yoga or running alleviated the pressure, however. In those cases, the activity was a removal from my practice, and an opportunity to engage in something completely unrelated, even if only for a short piece of the day. Whilst useful, those activities did nothing to deal with the underlying dissatisfaction with my practice that I was experiencing. My research, on the other hand, was an intense immersion in the fundamentals of my professional life. And far from being a simple extension of my working day, it had the opposite effect. I looked forward to my research and the time to reflect on my work. Ultimately it proved a form of catharsis, where the simple act of reading about it, thinking about it and writing about it diminished my angst and allowed me to renew my relationship to project management. For the first time I began to consider project management as more than just a job, but as a profession, and myself as a practitioner. Inevitably, as well, my research did more than just provide me a form of therapy. Over time, I began to reconsider the constructs of my practice and,

more than just writing about them, I began to change them. Work, to a very large extent, became a kind of laboratory where I could to exercise some of the insights I had gathered from my research. And, in a symbiotic way, the results of those exercises in turn informed the research directions I undertook.

This is not to say that I changed my work practices in significant ways overnight. My research developed over a long period of time and my work practices along with it. It is also difficult to pinpoint exactly 'when' I changed a particular practice. More often than not, it was only after considerable time that I noticed I was doing something differently and was able to link it back to a particular concept that I had been exploring in my dissertation. As time moved on I became more deliberate in my application of ideas to my work but there was always an element of 'unconscious' interaction between my research and my practice. I realised it was important to remain aware of how I conducted myself on a day-to-basis to ensure I was able to acknowledge the often subtle changes I was making to myself as a practitioner. A journal helped immensely this with task and it became commonplace for me to record my daily observations as I travelled home from work, providing me excellent source material for further research.

One of the more significant observations that I made during this period was the manner in which changes to seemingly minor work practices (which I refer to here simply as habits) played an enormous part in altering my perspective on my identity as a practitioner overall. Rather than any radical alteration to practice, what I discovered was an ongoing and effectively circular pattern in which I would attempt to integrate a new way of doing into an existing set of habits. This would in turn stimulate the need for further adjustments to habits. I could therefore not simply consider the impact of the idea itself as if separate from an existing mode of practice, I had also to consider its 'fit' into a plethora of other habits and whether or not its inclusion was to the benefit of the practice overall. There was, however, no specific habit of practice that spoke to me as being more essential than any other, except perhaps the habit of constantly reflecting on the other habits! Eventually I came to realise that my identity as a

practitioner was perhaps no more than the collective sum of the work habits I chose to adopt and, just as importantly, the ones I chose not to adopt.

Notions of awareness, choice, practice and identity became central to my daily activities as I began to relate my research to specific work issues and how I dealt with them. One of the earliest deliberate attempts on my part to effect a change in my practices as a result of my research was in the area of time. In formal project methodology, the management of time is a specific competency, and one that occupied the majority of my day. Whether it was schedule construction, or review, the presentation of schedule milestones to steering committees, the management of deviations or the renegotiation of slippages with suppliers, time was a central feature of my practitioner identity. My research had shown me, however, that the tools utilised to manage time constituted a language in themselves, and far from representing a bounded and deterministic project environment, they were extremely contextual and contingent and open to significant interpretation. My early attempts to take advantage of this understanding, though, proved less than successful.

At first I took the rather radical step of eliminating the detailed scheduling apparatus from the project planning cycle, substituting instead a far broader and flexible major milestone arrangement in which individual project streams could articulate and manage their own work elements on the proviso that the major milestones were met. In this particular interpretation I was acknowledging the near impossibility of gathering accurate estimates from any of the relevant parties so I adopted instead a position of constant renegotiation of internal dates. Whilst this approach worked relatively well inside the project team, with reasonable progress made towards all the major milestones without the distracting and time-consuming overhead of detailed scheduling activities, I failed to appreciate the alternative interpretations of the schedule in existence. In this specific case I misread the power aspect of the schedule and the manner in which it was utilised within the steering committee to which I reported.

The executives within the committee at first were reasonably supportive of my approach to time management, themselves being constantly exposed to the

tedium of re-baselining sessions. It became apparent as we progressed, however, that the lack of an ability to reduce any slippage or delay to first causes was causing a lot of friction between steering committee members. This was because in a traditional schedule clear ownership of specific tasks is indicated, and thus appropriate responsibility apportioned for the delivery of each. In the model I was pushing, no such responsibility was clearly articulated, other than that of the project team overall, including the steering committee. Rather than designating blame within the sub-groups of the project organisation (for which the individual executives on the steering committee were responsible) the responsibility for slippage and delay had to be accepted and dealt with by the project, and its steering committee, as a team. In hindsight this was naïve of me.

I had pushed my model through on the back of a revised organisational charter from the new CIO (also on the steering committee) that had proclaimed “One Team” and viewed any attempt to devolve blame to lower levels of the organisation as being out of step with the new corporate culture. My naïveté was to accept such statements at face value. The organisation at that point was going through an internal restructure that ultimately saw 80% of the IT department forced to re-apply for their jobs, including everyone on the steering committee (except, of course, the CIO). Whatever ‘culture’ may be it is clearly more than a product of the words in a charter, and whilst I had been pleased with myself for taking advantage of the language within the charter in order to effect what I considered a powerful change for the better, I had misread the actuality of the situation. It was only after an informal conversation with one of the steering committee members, several months into the project, that I realised where I had gone wrong.

The steering committee members had, with the exception of the CIO, been with the company for an average of 15 years and were now desperately worried for their jobs. I had misunderstood their need to apportion blame within the context of a detailed schedule as being about the typical machinations of the corporate

executive, and their desire to utilise 'my' project to further their personal goals, whatever they may have been. On reflection, whilst this may have been true to a certain point, and in the same way it would be true of probably any group of people, there was a more fundamental issue at stake. With their jobs on the line, the members of the steering committee were now struggling with their own issues of professional identity. What had once been a relatively stable working environment was now being severely disrupted. The project I was running was large enough that every major team in the department was represented on its steering committee and it was the only forum where the performance of all their teams could be contrasted directly with one another.

What I had failed to understand was the manner in which the individual steering committee members were utilising the language of the project, in this particular case the schedule, to maintain their own professional identities in the face of significant uncertainty. What I took for Machiavellianism had been the simple desire of people to show that whatever the cause of the delay, it had not been, at least, in their area of responsibility. The approach I took removed their ability to do that, and as the project progressed, this inability on their part to demonstrate the specific progress of their area in the context of the project made them more and more uncomfortable in front of their CIO. The upshot was that I eventually had to abandon my original approach and construct a highly detailed schedule for review and distribution. There were significant overheads in doing this and it led to many other issues, many of which I had foreseen. Nonetheless, the cost of not doing it had proved, in this particular operating environment, far too steep.

On a more positive note, in my next role managing a data centre relocation project for a large insurance company, I managed to build a far more inclusive and creative project culture than I had in previous projects. For example, in previous projects I had generally constructed extremely rigorous organisational charts, highlighting for each and every staff member their specific roles and responsibilities, lines of reporting and scope of work. Whilst this is a necessary work product, I also felt that by implementing it too early in a project or with

insufficient flexibility, people tended to become 'bounded' by what they saw in the chart and would fail to contribute to the broader aspects of the project. Conversations between different parts of the project and different stakeholders became 'closed off' even before they had begun because the parameters of the conversation had already been established within the framework of the organisational chart. By deliberately avoiding this I hoped to generate exactly those kinds of 'strange conversations' I had discovered in my research.

Initial reaction to the approach of 'strange conversations' amongst my team members was mixed. Some clearly saw the opportunities this presented for them to work beyond the strict limits of their professional structures and develop a more expansive role within the project. Others were clearly concerned that such a lack of definition threatened the coherence of their specific practice. In the end, however, the approach proved quite successful, with the vast majority of the team embracing the concept. In simplest terms, I encouraged every team member, no matter their function, to speak directly to key stakeholders at every opportunity and to discuss the project in whatever terms they desired. Ordinarily, individual team members in a project would not have license to speak with key stakeholders without going through clearly defined and tightly managed communications channels. A feature of such channels was that they tended to produce responses that conformed to pre-existing risk, quality and/or scope definitions. We agreed as a team that our strange conversations should coalesce around the key question of: "What did success for this project look like?" Whilst we also conducted innumerable 'formal' workshops for the purpose of gathering business requirements, these tended to be highly structured and by the very nature of their process did not illicit some of the highly creative and unusual solutions that we uncovered during our 'strange conversations'.

For example, one of the most useful changes we made during the course of the project occurred after a conversation between our project administrator and a senior technician within our customers engineering department. Generally speaking, these two people would not normally have met during the course of

the project, given their very different roles, but emboldened by our new communications principles, our project administrator had taken it upon herself to personally visit this technician to sort out a relatively trivial timesheet issue. In doing so they began discussing aspects of the work the technician was doing to implement a new wireless system. Whilst my project team new about this project through normal channels, what we did not know about was an ancillary piece of service request software they had built to support it. In the discussion our project administrator realised that it sounded much like the one we were in fact going through the design phase for. This proved to be correct and, with some relatively minor modifications we were able to use to the same system for our project, achieving cost savings of hundreds of thousands of dollars and time savings of several months.

Whilst such interactions could easily be dismissed as the kind of chance corridor conversations that inevitably occur, the point is that they don't. Work environments are becoming increasingly specialised and, in my experience, people are far less inclined to interact between them. It could also be argued that with suitable internal reporting systems such strange conversations should be unnecessary, as the details of all projects in the company are made available through formal channels. The fact is, this company had such a system and I knew of the project, but I did not know of a secondary product they had developed to support it. The reporting system did not capture such a level of detail and, if it had, how many managers would have had the capacity to read it? The reality has been for me that, in the projects on which I work, the languages used by specialists are becoming increasingly insular and the sheer amount of information they produce quite literally beyond any individual's capacity to accommodate. In the 12 months of my last IT project, our team produced over 3,700 separate project artefacts, and this project was by no means large. It requires significant proactivity to transcend these specialised linguistic frameworks and the information overload they produce, but it is something I found could be done proactively.

Overall, in the eight years that elapsed between starting and completing my dissertation, I underwent a profound change in my professional identity. As I outlined in my narrative at the beginning, my relationship with project management as a profession had been problematic. Whilst I enjoyed many aspects of project management, and found working on difficult problems with highly skilled and educated people to be, at times, extremely satisfying, there was a profound angst underpinning my work. In the end, there was no coherent identity I could form that made sense of the various bits and pieces of my working day. I had, as Rorty would have put it, “radical and continuing doubts” about the project management vocabulary I used. My research, whilst not completely eradicating these doubts, has enabled me to view project management as more than simply interesting work. By taking my own path to look deeper into the issues that I believe exist at the core of project management, I have been able to generate a perspective on my work that I believe makes it worthy of being considered a unique practice, one founded on the principle of phronesis and encompassing within it a vast range of potential methods for resolving the many and varied problems of project management in the corporate sector. Above all, I had recognised that my “radical and continuing doubts” did not need to be the source of my angst about the practice of project management, but could in fact serve as the foundation of it.

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