

# THINKING ABOUT “THE MANAGEMENT OF PROJECTS”

*Insights from  
a processual–relational approach*

***Svetlana Cicmil*** PhD MBA BSc (Civ Eng)

*Faculty of Business and Law  
University of the West of England , Bristol*

# Outline

Processual–relational approach: social constructionism and the process of becoming (*social construction of project*)

Studying and understanding what goes on in projects as social arrangements:

Attention refocused from stabilised entities or objects towards processes, forms and quality of human relating , human condition , change and indeterminism

creating new insights, knowledge and understanding and an alternative view of project practice, project practitioners and research ethics

Provocations and illustrations

Dialoguing with polyphony of voices, values and ideologies

# Reconstructing Project Management (Morris 2013a and 2013b)

## Key propositions I

The book is about the **knowledge** needed to manage projects and programs efficiently and effectively

The reviewed evidence about project failures indicated that the standard PM knowledge system was/is too **narrow**

Some of the Aims:

- building a **discipline for the delivery of goals**, because such discipline is both possible and desirable, but
- needs to be enlarged from how many **perceive** it today
- first we need to widen the **epistemological** base and align **methodologically**

The Rationale: we need to be influencing **context** and enhancing the **relevancy and value** of what in reality can be exciting, challenging and enormously important, while addressing the major issues facing **society** today.

# Reconstructing Project Management (Morris 2013a and 2013b)

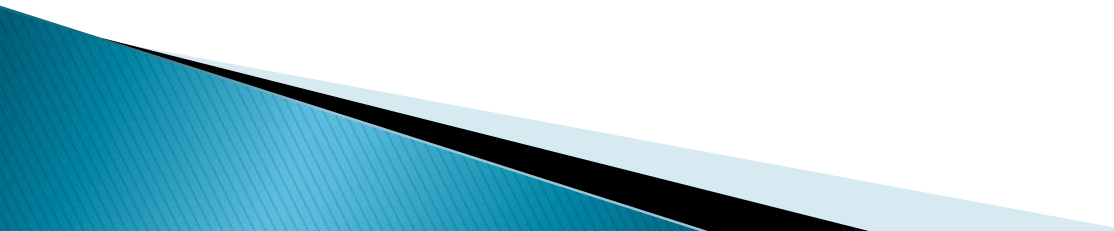
## Key propositions II

The Management of Projects (MoP) approach takes the 'Project' as the focus of analysis

After all, project management is a **social construct**; projects are 'invented not found.'

What are the **values** that managers of projects and programmes should be displaying?

What should be the **ethos** of project management and, for that matter, the responsibility of PM/MoP researchers and educators ?



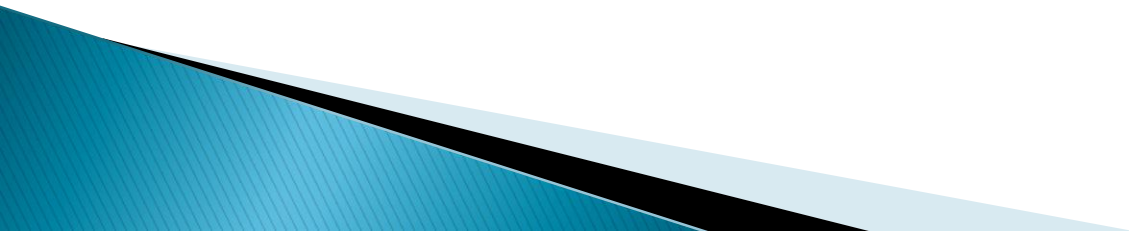
*What is the 'it' that project managers  
presume to manage?*



## A Provocation

Projects are definable, detectable (historically) and recognisable due to an ultimate common feature– PLC/PDLC?

But, on reflection, a PLC/PDLC can be very different depending on what we decide to focus on and what to 'not see'



# A model of PLC/PDLC

adapted from Taggart and Silbey's (1986)

- ▶ initial wild enthusiasm
- ▶ emerging disillusionment
- ▶ total confusion
- ▶ search for the guilty
- ▶ punishment of the innocent
- ▶ promotion of trouble-makers, opportunists and non-participants

\*as observed, experienced and perceived in IT/Software development and implementation settings



## Social constructionism...

- ▶ is explicitly based in a hermeneutic tradition where there is no knowledge beyond individuals' subjective and inter-subjective interpretations of reality
- ▶ Social phenomena are constructions and they may either be reconstructed or undone.
- ▶ not viewing what exists as something natural that one should subordinate oneself to, but **seeing the existing phenomena as strange** (disruptions of consensus, of discursive closure, and of seemingly harmonious, robust meanings)
- ▶ Paying attention to language (discourse, speech, rhetoric, labelling, metaphors ) and context; because the shifts in the world are produced by (changing) language (Linehan & Kavanagh, 2006)



## Social constructionism II

*What is the 'it' that project managers presume to manage?*

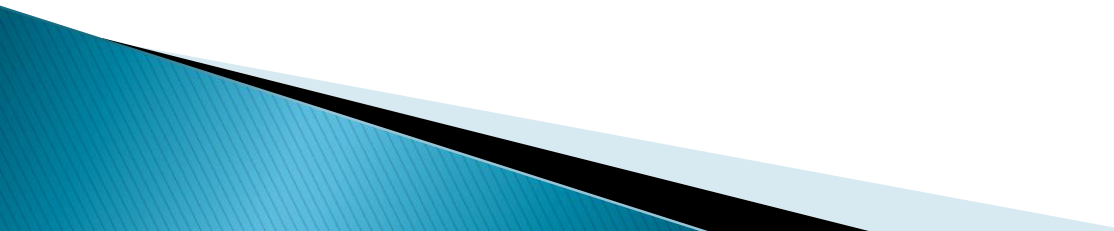
It implies that project is both constructed and made-sense of in social interaction between individuals in a specific context and that it is the task of research to enhance our understanding of these interactions

Perception-knowledge –practical rationality are interwoven

Our ways of being (existing) impact on our ways of doing, implying multiple interpretative possibilities and particular *ethical* demands




# Emergence

- ▶ project as an emergent outcome of disparate, ambiguous political processes embedded in a historical, social, political and structural context
  - ▶ project members are permanently interpreting themselves (their security, equality, freedom and power) as they go on jointly accomplishing work with others (the project)
  - ▶ by doing so people interpret the project itself as they act together (the becoming of the project)
  - ▶ their identity is reproduced and changed through their actions
  - ▶ so is the way people interpret the project
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## Collaboration from a processual–relational perspective

Project collaboration is seen as an emerging process of meaning–making and sense–making; a complex relational process in the medium of conversations, symbols and power asymmetries

It changes the structure of the local social setting (the project) as it goes on, but is simultaneously constrained by the always existing, obligatory regulations, boundaries and patterns of the project setting as the experiential context

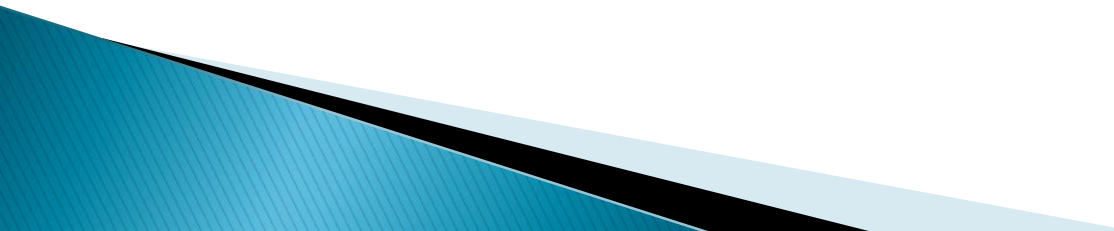
- culture as social–relational practice, as a meaning–making process, not as a detectable variable
  - the fluidity of cultural categories, emerging identities, and the context–dependent and history–dependent nature of self–identification and self–consciousness
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## Skills for managing projects

The role and skills of managers and non-managers as shared-meaning makers which enables joint action in the context where self-conscious individuals continuously evaluate and make judgements about their freedom, security, equality and power in a specific context of the living preset



## Competent project manager?

- ▶ a skilful technician
  - ▶ objective decision maker and rational implementer
  - ▶ value-neutral, competent, professional
  - ▶ one who knows and is in control
  - ▶ purposeful communicator
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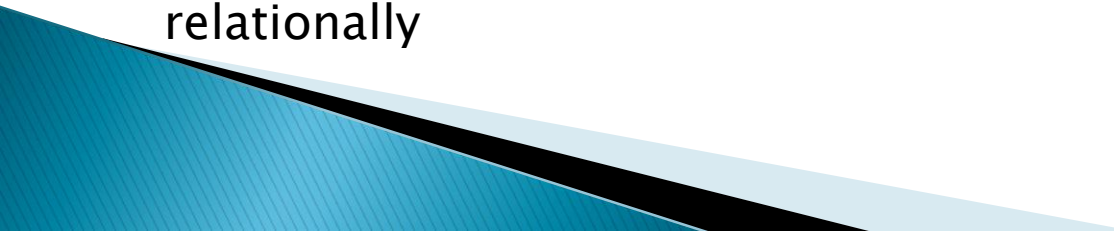
## On PM skills, practice and praxis

PMs as involved-in-the-world, intuitive, social (with values) and political (with virtues) actors in context, sense- and meaning-makers, doing whatever is necessary to 'get-the-job-done '

Attention to the political domain where the key role of the manager shifts to identifying and reconciling difference in a context where fluidity rather than stability (including identities) is prevailing

this process of engaging and functioning (PRAXIS) 'is not restricted to explicit, formal, expert skills but also encompasses learning about the community's viewpoints, the language it uses, the relations of importance etc.. '*(Linehan and Kavanagh, 2006, p.58)*

perceiving situations rapidly, intuitively, holistically, visually, bodily, relationally



# Recommendations for researchers

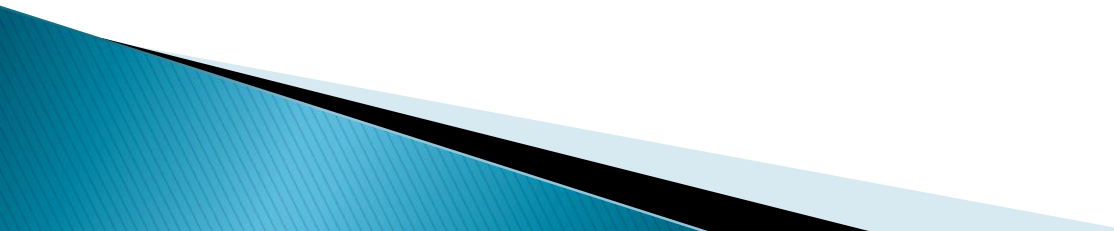
## Theoretical approaches to studying projects

- there is no view from nowhere
- projects as experienced 'in their average everydayness' in a local situation
- a broad inspiration from a variety of theories and ideas

## Methodological issues

- Emergent enquiry
- Practice oriented ethnography, collaborative enquiry

Be involved in project groups generating unexpected relationships, encouraging dialogue, asking questions to stimulate multiple inputs, listen carefully to what practitioners have to say , highlighting challenges, useful techniques or crises that they have experienced (Linehan and Kavanagh, 2006)




## Why may Social Constructivism be attractive?

*The field of project and PM studies is constantly constructed and re-constructed by the scientific community*

*Social constructionism encourages pluralism in project/PM research*

*Attempts to develop a more sophisticated, human and spiritual understanding of the nature of project work especially if the focus is on the concept of practice*

*ALLOWS us to consider the many possible emergent (positive and negative) features and consequences in project context (adventure, heroism, accomplishment, self-actualisation; but also resistance, marginalisation, emancipation, withdrawal, risk-aversion)*





## Management Education – has the ground moved?

‘While the demand for management education is sustained by the belief that improved economic performance requires more of it, ... the evidence of improved competence is not easy to find. *But education, even for management, must ultimately be a matter of faith, or belief in values that are fundamental.*’

(Reed and Anthony, 1992, p.607)

