Existential questioning as critical knowing: an exploration of power, epistemic injustice and emancipation in project manager’s practice

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We need to stop doing Science and return to the most fundamental question of all - “the Being of being”, the real of the real, the is of is-ness’ (Introna, 1997, p.12).

Abstract:

In this paper we explore how existential hermeneutic (and philosophical questioning more broadly) might provide a deeper understanding of manifestations of epistemic violence in project-based organising and project management practice, and the possibility of working thought the existential disruptions to our own underlying conventions and assumptions, towards emancipatory transformative redefinition in everyday practice (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). It is narrated in the spirit of existential questioning (Heidegger, 1993, 1996; Douglas-Mullen, 1995; Segal, 2015) and attends to a ‘lived experience’ of one of the authors in his existential struggle to reconnect with his practice as project manager (MacIntire 1988, Introna 1997).

As many authors have pointed epistemological assumptions operate on and govern us without us being explicitly attuned to the ways in which we are constituted by these epistemologies. They constitute us in such ways that their legitimacy appears beyond question. Heidegger’s concept of ‘das man” is an example; so too is Foucault’s notion of discourse and Marx’s notion of ideology. As an existential hermeneutic process, the paper will focus on an epistemic injustice (c.f. Fricker, 2007) through the lived experience of one of the authors of the paper (BR), a project management practitioner who was able to question the legitimacy of the scientific forms of project management discourse but not before he went through years and expense in the violence of doubting his own capability to perform effectively according to the idealised norms of scientific forms of project management.

We wish to show and argue that project managers in the IT/IS development context (and possibly, more generally) have become ‘victimised’ and exposed to existential vulnerabilities in their everyday practice through the unquestioned, un-discussable epistemological framing of project management (c.f. Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007, Lindgren et al., 2014; Andersson and Wickelgren, 2009; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2009; Hodgson and Cowen, 2015).
As a discourse of emancipation the paper will chart the way in which BR’s lived experience of being at risk developed from initially seeing himself as at fault and responsible for not performing according to the taken-for-granted expected standards of project management, a process of attempting to improve his performance as a project manager (PM) within the prevailing norms of project management and finally to a questioning of the taken-for-granted assumptions of the epistemology of project management.

The process of BR’s liberation occurred over a number of years. It started as an initial frustration and questioning of self-worthiness. No matter how hard one tried to be the project manager that the theory said one ought to be, these glorified models of projects and methodologies of project management seemed unable to sustain the reality of everyday ‘getting the job done’ (Introna, 1997).

The process of writing his PhD thesis became BR’s way of (critical hermeneutic) knowing and understating how he had unknowingly been solicited and constituted by a dominant discourse. His ‘working through’ its various manifestations of power, enabled him to re-author his way of being a project manager, making an understanding of the epistemic dimensions of project management a central “competency” in becoming an authentic project manager.

Emancipation in this process did not mean turning his back on the dominant discourse but it did allow BR the playfulness of being able to see the dominant discourse as one amongst many other discourses, to be used on those occasions which were situationally appropriate. It thus also sensitised him in a phenomenological way to the relationship between the situation and the project management perspective to be used in the situation. This kind of sensitivity to the appropriate project management discourse is not even on the raider of those who assume a dominant and reductive project management scientific discourse. In this sense rather than attempting to violently force himself into the reductive expectations of the norms of the so called science of project management, BR came to be guided by the authority of his own practical wisdom as a PM (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Cicmil 2006)

We argue that ‘re-description’ of practice is a process of emancipatory transformative redefinition (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) and a way of critical knowing and critical embodied performativity. While revisiting the importance of philosophical reflections on the meaning and accessibility of ‘lived experience’ of project managers we also discuss what it might mean to regain hermeneutic freedom methodologically (Gendlin’s (1996? Or 1981?) process that allows participants to metamorphosis their ways of being, from what he calls a “felt sense” to clarity of focus), ethically (The Levinasian ethical attunement to difference) and pedagogically (the existential pedagogy of hermeneutic liberation, c.f Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011).
Indicative References:


