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International Journal of Project Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijproman

Essay

Who are we? Reflections on the construction of project scholarship identity

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I was extremely honored when offered the opportunity to write a brief response to the distinguished scholars' essays to celebrate the 40th anniversary of *International Journal of Project Management*. At the same time, I was concerned with my ability to execute this project on schedule with the limited time and sleep of a mother of an eight-week-old baby. With the blue eyes of my newborn staring at me as I worked to formulate this response, it felt as though he were asking, "Who am I, who are you, and—more importantly—who are we, you and me together; what makes us distinctive?" Reflecting and making sense of such important identity-related questions is crucial also for the community of scholars studying and writing about projects, as the identity of the research community ultimately directs the scholarly activities and research we are and will be conducting. From my perspective, a strong and distinct identity has been one of the key strengths of our scholarly community, and as I see it, it also acts as a way of avoiding the potential inflection traps and academic drift discussed in essays by Pinto and Meredith as well as guides our future research endeavors in the area of organizational behavior in projects elaborated by Turner.

To borrow the metaphor of the sailing ship introduced by Pinto, I think a discussion of who is (and who will be) sailing and navigating the ship—and, more importantly, how those in the ship see themselves—is central to understanding what has been done over the past 40 years, where are we now, and where we should be going. How would we describe the important elements of the identity of the scholarly community researching projects, publishing in project management journals, and attending project management conferences? What kind of identity construction work has been and should be taking place? How can our identity potentially help us to manage the problems and potential strong winds of the future?

Acknowledging that identity claims are highly subjective, situated in context and time, as well as negotiated and developed continuously as the community is changing and evolving, I will try to build on some of my identity-related experiences and reflect these against the suggested actions and steps our community should be taking, as brought up in the essays. I will focus specifically on the following themes (three R's) raised in the essays: relevance, research focus, and reviewing. I will discuss how these themes may relate to the identity construction processes of

our research community. As I agree wholeheartedly with the excellent key messages in the essays, my perspective will be more complementary than challenging.

Let me start with a personal reflection on how I entered the community of PM scholars as a doctoral student many years ago. At the time, the paradigm shift, called for by the Rethinking Project Management Network (Winter, Smith, Morris & Cicmil, 2006), was ongoing. I have an industrial engineering background, and I was originally trained in the planning-oriented techniques that at that time represented to me what project management was about. Therefore, I expected the content of my first project management conference to be mostly focused on planning techniques and simulation and optimization models discussed by Turner in his essay as the hard paradigm. The conference was a revelation for me in many ways: the program featured a plethora of diverse topics and a variety of alternative theoretical perspectives, as well as presentations from both academics and practitioners. It focused not only on the management of single projects, but also on such themes as inter-organizational relationships, projects and strategy, and project-based firms and their capabilities. I realized that the field and community were not as inward-looking and narrow as portrayed by operations management textbooks and standards I had read; rather, discussions were highly multifaceted and cross-disciplinary, bringing together diverse topics and scholars from different fields with the joint passion for and genuine dedication to understanding projects as a phenomenon and way of organizing.

This conference experience affected and shaped my early scholarly identity significantly. Furthermore, I realized that in addition to developing prescriptive models of how managers can optimize stakeholder management with a normative approach, I could broaden my theoretical base and aim to understand and explore how project managers are making sense of their stakeholder environments in reality, as well as how this directs their stakeholder engagement practices, particularly concerning more neglected stakeholders. More importantly, the community and senior scholars were highly welcoming, despite being a doctoral student who had just started her research. I particularly remember the discussion and encouraging comments from one of the senior scholars when I expressed my suspicions of the quality of my

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2021.11.009>

Received 27 November 2021; Accepted 29 November 2021

Available online 9 December 2021

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reviews of the conference papers. His-encouraging comments and gratefulness for me taking up the reviewer task are still valuable memories for me.

Indeed, I would like to believe that my first engagements with the project management research community reveal some important and enduring identity elements on which we have built over the years and that we can, as a community, further strengthen and promote: being open and welcoming to new ideas, perspectives, and people; being particularly encouraging to early career scholars; facilitating constructive dialog between practitioners and academics; engaging with relevant and meaningful topics; and appreciating the valuable work that reviewers are doing. Project research and its community have obviously evolved and expanded over recent years, which is clearly reflected in all the essays; the field has even further diversified as levels of analysis have extended and new theoretical perspectives are introduced (Gerald & Söderlund, 2018). The increasing pluralism can obviously challenge the maintenance of a common academic identity and lead to its fragmentation or even identity crisis, but it can also act as an opportunity to strengthen a coherent community identity that encourages cross-disciplinary and managerially relevant approaches, as well as acknowledges reviewing as a central element of our professional identity.

1. About relevance—valuing close practitioner collaborations as a central element of our identity

Particularly, Pinto and Meredith touch on the danger of our research not being managerially relevant, ignoring the “so what question” and practical value, and distancing ourselves from practicing managers through academic drift. Meredith also advocates for the importance of empirical data to conduct managerially relevant research. Having collaborative practitioner connections has always been a strong element of our scholarly community identity. Although criticism is periodically made of the PM professional associations and their standards for ignoring research, as Turner posits, I think associations can also act as our asset in preventing academic drift and in enabling “industry is our laboratory” thinking. I believe we should value our close connections to practicing project managers and professional associations; they are not a threat to our academic credibility and instead can actually ensure both rigor and relevance, as well as strengthen our identity as a scholarly community. Close connections offer early career scholars networks for data collection, the possibility to solve complex problems that are difficult for managers to address themselves, and the opportunity to cover issues that are likely to become important in the future. In addition, collaborative relationships to practitioners may also support the shift to process and practice-based research approaches increasingly used in theorizing on e.g. project networks (Sydow, forthcoming 2022).

As the essays describe, the theory–practice gap is related to both how research is conducted and how it is communicated to managerial audiences. To further strengthen our identity, I think even more effort should be invested in structures that ensure managerial relevance from early on in the research process, so the right and meaningful problems can be solved. Potential solutions may include engaging managers in the research and doctoral supervision committees, enabling research exchanges among early career scholars in the industry, encouraging co-authored articles with the practicing managers, publishing debates between academics and practitioners in our journals, and nurturing productive relationships between scholars and practitioners. Meredith also discusses research design and design science as a means to improve managerial relevance. Following this line of thinking, methodological openness toward engaged scholarship (van Marrewijk & Nessing, 2019; Gerald & Söderlund, 2016) and solution spotting (Holmström, Ketokivi & Hameri, 2009) could further support efforts toward conducting managerially relevant research. In addition to evaluating and researching the performance in use of solutions developed by practitioners (for example, agile project management), we could also—in the spirit of design science—engage even more with the discovery, crafting,

and development of forward-thinking solutions. For example, the development of novel research-based methods to facilitate innovations in complex projects (e.g. Crossrail, DeBarro et al., 2015) and tools to facilitate project integration such as Last Planner (Ballard, 2000) are examples of such work, and they support our efforts toward balancing both rigor and relevance, as well as enable the sharing of scientific knowledge in a practitioner-accessible form.

Finally, it is important to remember that research can be managerially relevant in diverse ways (Wiegand, Becker, Imschloss & Reinartz, 2020); in addition to direct problem solving, managerially relevant research can act as an inspiration for project managers, helping them gain new perspectives, map future trends, and extend their project management horizon. As Meredith argues, for our research to act as inspiration, we must communicate it inspirationally. Thus, I particularly believe that new channels and formats offered by social media can help to communicate and exchange ideas with project practitioners.

2. About research focus—strengthening the cross-disciplinary identity as a means to avoid the overspecialization trap

Learning more about less and the dangers of studying niche phenomena related to projects are highly valid problems addressed in the essays (although learning less about more can also pose us problems – particularly if we change the topics and theories too often in our attempts to follow fashionable research trends). Many of us are facing the institutional complexities within the academic system, where performance measurement, continuous evaluation, and career paths encourage us to dig deeper into our own silos and act as paper production machines that also aim for publication in high-quality journals. At the same time, many of us would love to undertake risky research ideas and build genuine cross-disciplinary collaborations with scholars from non-traditional and distant research fields, while also maintaining the Humboldtian ideal of science. Such identity struggles are particularly challenging for early career scholars, and resolving them would ultimately require changes to the reward structures and career systems of project management scholars.

In addition to encouraging methodological openness to enrich our field, radical cross-disciplinary research should also be rewarded: it is increasingly recognized that teams from different disciplines typically produce more creative and disruptive research outputs. Specifically, Turner’s analysis provides insightful ideas on the cross-disciplinary research topics with which we as a community have and could engage. While funding bodies and instruments play a significant role here, project management journals and their policy also matter. Special issues that would encourage papers authored jointly by scholars from different disciplines and an unexpected combination of theoretical perspectives can develop significant new knowledge and further advance our cross-disciplinary research and identity. Furthermore, article formats that would allow the positioning of the findings more broadly to various discourses and theoretical conversations could also help project scholars in explicating how their project findings actually elaborate further the theories they are borrowing and using from other disciplines.

Finally, instead of being reserved about the study of grand challenges as part of project research, I see much value and opportunity in how their research can also strengthen our identity by offering us meaningful cross-disciplinary problems, as well as new arenas to explore practices of project organizing, coordination, and governance—themes to which Turner alluded in his essay. Projects provide novel perspectives on how to tackle significant societal challenges, such as climate change (Morris & Teerikangas, 2015) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Winch et al., 2021), i.e., large-scale, complex, uncertain, and evaluative challenges with time constraints (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016); more importantly, they provide us with meaningful research subjects that also call for cross-disciplinary collaborations.

3. Re-engineering the review process: reviewing as a means to strengthen our professional identity

Pinto discusses refining the review process and reminds us of our responsibility as a community to ensure that the standards of excellence and research quality are maintained. Indeed, reviewing is crucial to strengthening our professional identity: thorough and constructive reviews are most critical to the development of our discipline and our common identity. Being a good academic citizen in our community involves reviewing, but this is easier said than done. Although my experience is that significant progress has taken place over recent years, I am also concerned with the future of reviewing. Instead of suggesting incremental refinement, re-engineering of the whole review process may be needed. The reality is that with an increasing number of project management-related journals, many project scholars are receiving numerous review invitations with tight deadlines and struggling with all the review tasks and deadlines. At best, reading the manuscript thoroughly and writing an insightful and constructive review could easily take the majority of a monthly workload. This development may endanger the review process and may lead to sloppy reviews and challenges in finding committed reviewers. Artificial intelligence and novel editorial tools can to some extent help manage this problem and support the search for a diversified pool of reviewers, but new modes of reviewing could also be experimented. In particular, I believe we should be even more inclusive and engage early career scholars, as well as practitioners, if possible, in the art of reviewing to strengthen the formation of their reviewer identity. One reviewer training related idea for how to facilitate deeper learning and identification is pair-reviewing, where a senior scholar shares their review process with juniors. Whenever possible, opening the lifecycle of manuscripts systematically with all the reviews attached could also act as a valuable learning resource for younger scholars. Furthermore, rewarding junior reviewers and developing more transparent processes with clear criteria for scholars on how they can proceed to the editorial boards of project management journals could also support the development of the reviewer and, hence, the professional identity of our community.

4. Final words

To conclude, my conference experience illuminated the important

role of meaningful personal encounters in the identity building of our scholarly community. Little things do matter in identity work. For me, how we approach and encourage each other and try to see value in others' research work (even in approaches that differ highly from our own) are the most valuable elements of the identity of our research community and I hope they will also contribute to our prosperous future.

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