



The wisdom of conversations: Existential Hermeneutic Phenomenology (EHP) for project managers

Bradley Rolfe ^{a,*}, Steven Segal ^a, Svetlana Cicmil ^b

^a Macquarie Graduate School of Management, Macquarie University, 99 Talavera Road, Macquarie Park, North Ryde, Sydney, NSW 2113, Australia

^b University of West England, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, South West England BS16 1QY, United Kingdom

Received 24 February 2017; received in revised form 8 March 2017; accepted 8 March 2017

Available online xxxx

Abstract

This paper introduces Existential Hermeneutic Phenomenology (EHP) as an approach to reflecting on and studying the lived experience of project management practice. We argue that an EHP way of being is an effective approach for any practitioner confronted by significant existential disruptions to their practice. We develop our proposition of ‘the wisdom of conversations’ as an EHP enabled way for project managers’ practical coping with otherwise potentially inhibiting existential disruptions.

We understand EHP as a holistic philosophical practice which: 1. allows making the ‘lived experience’ of project management practice explicit for reflection, and 2. is available and useful to practitioners in the field. Heidegger provides the theoretical base through a language of existential categories, which are dimensions of being-in-the-world. Gendlin offers a practical method for accessing the states of being that Heidegger describes. Rorty offers promise, the ability to disclose new possibilities or ways of being-in-the-world through irony and practices of re-description. © 2017 Elsevier Ltd, APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Existential; Hermeneutic; Heidegger; Rorty; Gendlin; Anxiety; Redescription

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to argue for existential hermeneutic phenomenology (EHP) as an effective approach for any practitioner confronted with significant existential disruptions to their practice and explore how it could provide a way of project managers’ practical coping with otherwise potentially inhibiting existential disruptions. [Todres and Wheeler \(2001\)](#) identified the complementary nature of phenomenology, existentialism and hermeneutics in the area of qualitative research into nursing practice, arguing that “the articulation and description of ‘human experiences’ is foundational to practice

(p.2) They observed that “hermeneutics without phenomenology can become excessively relativistic. Phenomenology without hermeneutics can become shallow. Yet both without existentialism can become too captivated by thought and language, and thus forget our ontological presence that is more complex than any thought or language” (p.6).

Like Todres and Wheeler, we understand EHP as a holistic philosophical practice, a method constituted by a ‘family’ of philosophical techniques, which:

1. Allows making the ‘lived experience’ of project management practice, that is – our being in PM practice - explicit for reflection, and
2. Is available and useful to practitioners in the field. While applying it to the discipline of PM, we argue that EHP offers a model for dealing with a crisis of practice to which the normal language of that practice offers no comfort for the practitioner as it is the language and being of the practice

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Bradley.rolfe@mgsm.edu.au (B. Rolfe),
Steven.segal@mgsm.edu.au (S. Segal), Svetlana.cicmil@uwe.ac.uk (S. Cicmil).

itself that has been called into question (for full discussion, see Rolfe et al., 2016).

The turn towards hermeneutic, existential and phenomenological approaches towards management and organisational studies is gaining momentum. It begins with a 2005 paper by Karl Weick, passes through the work of Chia and Holt (2006), Zundel (2013), Dall'Alba and Sandberg (2014), Tomkins and Simpson (2015), Meyers (2016), is reflected in the work of Sandberg and Tsoukas (2016) and is the subject matter of an edited book by Segal and Jankelson (2016). This paper builds on the EHP themes emerging in these and other writers within management scholarship by bringing both the philosophy of Heidegger and the way in which he has been understood in organisation studies into the context of project management.

The paper begins by outlining the key concepts relevant to EHP using an illustrative reflection of an IT PM practitioner. We show how such practical theorising is grounded in Heidegger's onto-epistemological approach to lived experience and the categories of being (the existentials). We will then demonstrate the application of EHP through an analysis of the lived experience of three project managers. In the final section of the paper, we develop our proposition of 'wisdom of conversation' as a way of practical coping for project managers enabled by an EHP based philosophical practice.

2. Getting in the mood of practical theorising with EHP

"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." (Peter — Project Manager for Company 'X').

This quotation indicates some central dimensions of Existential Hermeneutic Phenomenology (EHP). Firstly, there is a disruption of Peter's fundamental assumptions. Secondly this disruption is existential in that it is grounded in his lived experience and it indicates a threat to his habitual ways of doing things as a manager. Thirdly he is perplexed in such a way that he cannot name or even account for the disruption. The experience of being perplexed and threatened without being able to name the threat is, in the technical language of Heidegger (1985), a form of existential anxiety. Existential anxiety is that kind of experience which is both objectless and nameless. Fourthly, Peter does not yet know that he is questioning his assumptions. He is too overwhelmed by the uncertainty of perplexity to be ready to get a handle on it such that he can begin to transform his lived experience into an opportunity for questioning. He is far too bewildered to question. EHP is the discipline of being able to morph from

being bewildered to turning the bewilderment into an explicit form of questioning assumptions in order to open up new possibilities. Peter has not done this yet.

And it is not inevitable that he will be able to turn his bewilderment into the opportunity for a reflexive questioning of his taken for granted assumptions about managing projects. It is just as likely that he may develop a defensive response to the anxiety of bewilderment. Heidegger calls such a defensive response "inauthentic." (1985:231) this is not a moral but an ontological term. It is intended to indicate that the uncertainty of bewilderment may be lived out as being too threatening. An inauthentic response is one in which the need for certainty and security overcomes the opportunity for the curiosity of questioning. The greatest threat to experiential and in situation learning is neither cognitive nor technical competence: it is the willingness to embrace the anxiety experienced in being paralysed as exemplified in the experience of Peter. Will he or won't he embrace the anxiety of bewilderment? — that is the question to which EHP addresses itself.

The fifth point is that EHP is not focused on questioning an "inner" self, a personality or an intra-psyche self. Rather it is focused on questioning ways of inhabiting a practice. As exemplified in the case of Peter, his anxiety was not related to his unconsciousness or conflicts between different parts of his inner self. His anxiety focused specifically on his way of being a manager. He bumped up against the limits of his way of being a project manager. In one of the only comments that Ludwig Wittgenstein ever made about Heidegger, he said that the version of existential anxiety described by Heidegger is one in which a person bumps up against the limits of their language of practice (quoted in Finch, 1995, p63). Peter bumped up against the limits of his language for practising and making sense of managing projects. As already indicated in order to seize upon this as a learning opportunity Peter needs to be willing to develop a sense of curiosity in the context of his existential anxiety. Curiosity and wonder are the basis for inquiry in the context of practice — the basis for becoming a wise practitioner. It is the mood in which theory and practice are woven into each other. This is why philosophers from Socrates to Sartre connect moods such as wonder and anxiety with the activity of philosophical reflection.

Peter's experience is not unique to him. It is part of the lived experience of becoming and being a professional. Linda Hill (2003) in her work on *Becoming a Manager* describes the uncertainty of novice managers caught by surprise in those circumstances in which the contingencies of lived experience undermined their taken for granted assumptions. She says: "As the managers learned about the realities of managerial work, they were plagued by a particular kind of surprise that arises when tacit job expectations are not met or features of the job are not anticipated." (Hill, 2003:23).

Mintzberg makes the same point when he uses the metaphor of sinking as a period of transition through which not all managers pass. He says that it is not "surprising that the most common management practice, sink or swim, ends up with much sinking and not much swimming — and more splashing frantically." (2004:200).

Tony Watson reinforces the same point with the same metaphor when he quotes a novice manager who says:

I wouldn't regard myself as someone who has ever been trained to be a manager. I was thrown in at the deep end when I began. I didn't know how I was going to survive – sink or swim, like. I suppose I knew I could hack it at the end of the day though, using my native wits and all that. I think I soon learned to manage. [...] To keep my head above water. Oh, I didn't mean to "be a manager" in the sense you are talking about. I mean just surviving to the end of the week or the month more like, without getting into too much trouble or upsetting too many folk. (Watson 2001:159).

It is not only the novice that experiences existential uncertainty. Uncertainty is part of management experience in general. What EHP offers is a way of deconstructing uncertainty. It focuses attention on the dangers and offers the possibility of working through it to open up new possibilities. Managing of projects is a craft that is saturated with existential uncertainty. There are just too many contingencies to reduce project managing to a nomothetic discipline. EHP provides an alternative to a scientific framing by working with the contingencies and uncertainties inherent in managing projects. It does not see uncertainty as an anomaly to be avoided but as an anomaly that calls into question accounts of managing projects, which reduce the latter to a set of beliefs around law-like behaviour.

In this, we will argue, EHP aligns with the day-to-day reality of managing projects. As Reich et al. (2008) observed in their research into IT-based project management:

One common characteristic observed was an unflinching realism about the challenges of IT projects. For example, senior project managers understand that their project teams are rarely on a well-defined journey where time, schedule and scope can be controlled tightly, where the milestones are fixed and clearly marked. Rather, they are on an expedition. Along the way, the unexpected happens and plans are challenged if not destroyed (p.266).

EHP is not a disengaged and abstract questioning of assumptions. It is a questioning of assumptions in the context of the lived experience of breakdowns or interruptions in practice. EHP is an intellectual practice of *contemplation* of lived experience through *caring* engagement with practice. It takes lived experience of a disruption of practice as its point of departure. In order to achieve this, lived experience needs to be made explicit and available for examination. We address this by introducing a unique combination of three dimensions of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, namely – existential, hermeneutic and phenomenological in the context of lived experience.

Such a questioning supports project managers in the lived reality of their practice, as opposed to a set of theoretical models that are meant to, a priori, describe the reality they inhabit.

3. The theoretical basis of EHP: Heidegger's "existentials"

It is welcoming to see the work of Martin Heidegger being introduced by Bronte van der Hoorn (2015) and van der Hoorn

and Whitty (2015) into project management discourse. They have demonstrated the significance of lived experience for project management theory and practice. However, they seem to assume that lived experience is not directly accessible and that it requires psychological and arts based research methods to access it (Van Der Hoorn, 2015:5).

In contrast to their position, we would like to show that lived experience can be accessed directly through the felt sense of disruption in lived experience. Furthermore, accessing of lived experience is more than a method of research; it is a competency central to the practical wisdom of project managing.

The logic of the hermeneutics of lived experience, as Segal (1995) has demonstrated, is such that when we are in the flow of lived experience, we are not attuned to lived experience. However, when there is a disruption in the felt sense of lived experience, we become directly attuned to lived experience. Rather than requiring arts based methods, a heightened sensitivity to interruptions in the felt sense of the flow of lived experience is a central competency for becoming attuned to lived experience and for managing the lived experience of projects. Project managers who are attuned to the interruptions of the felt sense of a project are in a position to develop their competencies for managing surprise, uncertainty and the temporality that is central to any project.

Heidegger's existentials will be described in order to bring out the ways in which a disruption in the felt sense of being absorbed in lived experience allows for a heightened sensitivity to the contingencies of lived experience. They will then be operationalised in terms of two Heideggerian scholars: Richard Rorty and Eugene Gendlin, who offer techniques for working with disruptions in lived experience.

We introduced in the next sections four existentials as the dimensions of lived experience in Heideggerian tradition: *being in convention*; *experiencing existential anxiety*; *its articulation*; and *liberation or transition*.

3.1. Being in convention/average everydayness

Being-in-convention is a being that is always and already "there", situated and contextualised Segal (2015). The human finds itself as a being that is always and already in a familiar network of roles. However, its contextualisation as being-there (Da-sein) or as being-in-the-world is in the background of its attunement; so much so that the human being forgets it and does not take it into account in its way of making sense of the world. In colloquial terms, we say the fish does not see the water in which it swims; the human being, while focusing on particular projects or objects, does not see the effect of the familiar context on its perception and action.

Heideggerian hermeneutics of lived experience focuses on how we become present to the background ways of standing in relationship to the world or sense making through which we relate to specific entities within the world (Segal, 1999). Heidegger (1985) claims that it is only under certain conditions of disruption that the background patterns of familiar sense making become explicit. He sees anxiety as central to

estrangement from the familiar such that the familiar becomes explicit.

3.2. Existential anxiety/disruption

Whereas phenomenology is the art of becoming attuned to lived experience, part of hermeneutics, in Heideggerian terms, is the art of becoming aware of our pre-conceptual attunement which informs our lived experience (Koestenbaum, 1978). Existential anxiety is the basis of becoming attuned to lived experience and is the basis of a hermeneutic inquiry into the pre-conceptual attunement which underpins lived experience. Heidegger (1985: 233) expresses this by saying that in anxiety the human being comes “face to face” with its familiar ways of being-in-the-world. For the sake of brevity, the dimension of anxiety that is of concern in this paper is that form of uncertainty that is unexpected and cannot be immediately named. We have a felt sense of uncertainty but are not quite able to both name the uncertainty and identify the object triggering off the uncertainty.

This form of uncertainty was exemplified by Peter. As Peter noted at the beginning of the paper, “no matter what I did, what changes I made to the schedule or to the delivery structure I couldn’t keep us on track.” As the project disrupted Peter’s world, his attempts to resolve the situation disrupted it further. He was in a state of existential uncertainty, estranged from the flow of the project but unable to name the uncertainty that was overwhelming him.

This leads to the third existential.

3.3. Articulating the disruption

Gendlin’s work on an articulation of the embodiment of lived experience, *as it is felt by the person experiencing it* is explicitly grounded in EHP (Galvin and Todres, 2012). Articulation is the process of naming the bodily ‘felt sense’ of a lived experience in moments of existential anxiety. The ‘felt sense’ precedes any conceptual or theoretical understanding. The interpretation and meaning of the experience, only comes after the ‘felt sense’ has been articulated (Gendlin, 1981).

Paying attention to the tensions that we carry in body is the basis for naming experiences that are typically taken for granted. It is important not to rush past the felt sense of the body and move directly into problem solving. Dwelling in the confusion of bodily self sense ‘clears a space’ for its expression. (Gendlin, 1996).

3.3.1. Focusing on the felt sense

Focusing as the reflexive practice of exploring the pre-conceptions underpinning our lived experience is a technique by which an individual names the felt sense of a particular problem (Gendlin, 1996). Disruptions are carried in a physical way.

Practitioner based feelings such as ‘uneasiness’, ‘frustration’, ‘incoherence’, ‘disconnection’, ‘anxiety’ emerge from this attentiveness to the felt-sense of the body. The task now is to listen to the body so that a word or group of words that

capture the overall quality of these feelings is identified. There should be, Gendlin (1996) maintains, a distinct feeling of release in the body that comes when a word (or ‘handle’ as he calls it) is a perfect fit for the felt sense. This requires a back-and-forward oscillation as various handles are tried. 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 means that different words become associated with the felt sense.

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 still a good fit with the 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 that you have given it. By putting a ‘handle’ to their felt-sense, the practitioner is now in a position to use this understanding to begin practically coping with the disruption that prompted the anxiety. The ‘felt sense’ is an experience of the primordial. As such it allows taken for granted assumptions of a practice to reveal itself. This is the basis for liberation and transformation.

3.4. Liberation through transformation

This is the fourth existential. As outlined in more detail by Rolfe et al. (2016), Richard Rorty’s concept of ‘ironic redescription’ is an existential hermeneutic or, put another way, a method for working through felt sense. Irony occurs through being dislocated from an existing vocabulary by an existential disruption. Through a deliberate practice of focusing on their felt-sense they may have acquired a ‘handle’ on the anxiety that they have carried with them physically. This ‘handle’ is the first tentative step in a broader act of redescription. Redescription allows for seeing the world in new ways and thus for the transformation of professional practice.

Understanding irony means understanding ‘language-games’. For Rorty, language creates rather than simply describes a world. It is, by definition, shared and serves to solve problems. It creates rather than corresponds to the world. He is critical of essentialist views of the world such as those offered by Plato and other rationalists who believe their language actually corresponds to the world. They are stuck in what he calls a “final vocabulary”. Rorty draws a distinction between people who are comfortable with their “final vocabulary”, and people who have a sense that their “language game” is no longer working as it should. Rorty sees the latter as more playful and calls the latter ‘ironists’ (Rorty, 1989:75).

Ironists remain acutely aware of the contingencies of their language, cognisant that the terms they have available to express the functions of their practice only gain meaning from their relationship to other terms, and the agreement of the practitioners that there is nothing that stands outside of language, such as a direct correspondence to the ‘real’ world

(Bernstein, 2003). 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).

What matters for the ironist is that a vocabulary has provided her with all the necessary tools for disclosing unfamiliar worlds full of new possibilities. Rorty calls this project *redescription*. For Rorty, redescription is the basis for seeing the world anew. It is a point central to EHP: language is the basis for describing the world. Working with a new language game provides a way of noticing and being in the world in a new way. 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” (Rorty, 1989:140).

The following section will explore this journey, from initial disruption to a transformation of practice, by situating the EHP method outlined above in the context of project management practice.

4. The EHP method in practice — empirical work

This section will highlight the usefulness of the EHP method to project management practitioners, by providing insights into the lived experience of three different practitioners — Peter, Alan and Angelina. Our thesis is that project managers can re-describe their projects through the existential categories of the EHP method.

4.1. About the participating practitioners and the research design

The interview excerpts used below were taken from a broader research study that focused on the relationship of project managers to their practice (Rolfe, 2011; Rolfe and Segal, 2011; Rolfe et al., 2016). The particular method used was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as developed by Smith et al. (2009). IPA as a research tool encourages the use of small participant sizes provided “adequate contextualisation is preserved” (Cope, 2011:608). Contextualisation is maintained by a pragmatic attitude towards participant selection, with participants chosen because of their particular relationship to the research question. In this case, one of the co-authors (‘the researcher’ from now on) chose participants because they exhibited characteristics of what Cicmil (2006) describes as “the virtuoso project manager [who] recognises the inseparability of thinking and doing, and acknowledges the intrinsic relations between project, self and group. Accordingly, they are able to perceive and manage situations rapidly, intuitively, holistically, visually, bodily and relationally.” (Cicmil, 2006:35).

The 6 project managers interviewed, (from whom Peter, Alan and Angelina, the focus of this paper, were drawn,) had each been practicing for over 10 years and had a proven track record of success across a number of different companies. The question the researcher was trying to answer was how these people had thrived (become virtuoso’s) in what was an

increasingly uncertain field where uncertainty referred to working with existential disruptions.

Interviews with virtuoso’s using the IPA method are typically structured around establishing their credibility as practitioners, and then describing their working through an existential disruption in their practice by accessing their felt sense. Working through their felt sense allows them to name and thus provide a language to their felt sense. The naming of their felt sense serves as the basis for conceptualising their lived experience. Naming of their lived experience not only provides information for the researcher but allows practitioners to develop new insights into their experience.

IPA allows for the development of theory on the basis of the description of lived experience. In this, IPA departs from more traditional and rationalist methods of how to practice project management, such as Prince2, which is an a-priori method imposed on the project while IPA focuses on theorising the managing of projects under ‘real-time’ conditions. Cope (2011) argues that IPA is 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).

In the following sections the credibility of Peter, Alan and Angelina will be described, how they dealt with disruption to their practice will then be articulated, and finally their respective working through renaming their practices will be discussed.

4.2. Starting the EHP journey — operating in a state of everyday averageness

4.2.1. Peter

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 their client in Sydney. He had taken the offer because of the challenge and opportunities it afforded him. It was, as he recalls, “*his dream project. It had everything I was looking for in terms of advancing my project management skills. I felt like I was a perfect fit for the role.*” For many months, Peter operated very well in the role. There were difficulties, he admitted, but all were the “*usual stuff that project managers faced, you know, changes of scope, not enough money and so on.*”

4.2.2. Alan

Alan was also very comfortable in his practice, at least in the initial stages. A 37-year-old project manager, Alan had responsibility for running a large IT and change management project for a US-owned 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. Alan had considerable experience in running these types of projects before, and was acutely aware of “*the impact to staff of these kinds of projects. People were going to lose their jobs, eventually, but you understood that going in. It's just part of the deal.*”

4.2.3. Angelina

The most experienced of the three in terms of project management, Angelina was a 35-year-old project manager implementing a new supply chain management system for an international airline freight company. Angelina had been delivering supply chain projects all over the world for nearly 15 years, and was aware of the highly fluid nature of what project management ‘was’: *“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.”* Angelina had already accepted that whatever she thought the formalised way of doing things was, it would have changed before the project was over: *“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.”*

5. Coping with the crises in PM practice — practicing EHP

Clearly, Peter, Alan and Angelina are not novices, operating in a state of average everyday familiarity with their work. Expressions such as “the usual stuff” and “part of the deal” highlights a state of being comfortable with their practice. Importantly, though, each has a differing level of appreciation, and thus preparedness, for how that average everydayness might change. Peter’s confidence is evident in his “perfect fit for the role”, whilst Alan is more equivocal in acknowledging that projects can have large impacts and that is “part of the deal”. Angelina is quite clear in the need to work through the contingencies of situations stating that “it will all turn to shit and... you cannot afford to pretend it was your failure”. These varying levels of preparedness for disruption become relevant as the conversation progresses.

5.1. From being in convention to existential anxiety/disruption

After elaborating the background of their project, the practitioners were asked to reflect on an existential disruption that had occurred in their practice. This was not to be simply an ‘issue’ encountered within the normal context of practice, no matter how significant. Existential disruption is when one’s familiar ways of dealing with things are called into question. Because one’s familiar ways of dealing with things are part of who one is as a project manager, disruption gives rise to an existentially reflexive form of questioning in which one’s being is an ‘issue’ in one’s practice. Thus it is not a questioning of an idea at an objective distance. It is also not a questioning of a subjectivity but a questioning of a way of being in relationship to the world or an average everyday way of being-in-the-world.

5.1.1. Peter

The researchers questioning revealed that Peter’s disruption emerged after several months of effort on his project, when their principal vendor began to suffer major delays with the completion of their allotted work. As Peter expressed it: *“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” Ordinarily, vendor delays fall within the context of average everyday practice. Project managers are responsible for reporting such delays to their steering committee, and advising them of the options for dealing with it. In this case, however, the delay to the project was threatening the viability of the company itself, with massive losses being incurred due to delayed product launches. As a result, Peter’s client began to threaten legal action against Peter’s consulting firm over the failure to manage the vendor adequately. Peter felt the client, and his own firm, were beginning to hold him personally accountable for the issues: *“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.”* As the delays continued, Peter soon began to share the steering committee’s doubts: *“I started to question everything. It was like every principle I had learned in courses or at university was now suspect.”*

5.1.2. Alan

As with Peter, the researchers question revealed that Alan’s questioning began at a point in his project when there was 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.”* During the early stages of the project, Alan saw this way of describing people as quite useful: *“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.”* This began to change when the affected staff were members of Alan’s own team. As he recalls: *“The resource manager kept talking about cutting back on our Band-7 level resources in the team and I said, that's not a Band-7 resource, that's Tarryn.”* Despite Alan’s objections, a number of his staff had their employment terminated, leaving Alan to ponder: *“They weren't let go for any other reason than our resource numbers didn't meet some magical profile — even though we all knew we needed their skills. I couldn't fit it into my world-view at all.”*

5.1.3. Angelina

Angelina’s disruption differed from Peter and Alan’s in that her existential questioning was not imposed upon her externally by either time or resource pressures. Rather, Angelina deliberately sought out situations that, in her words, *“challenged my status quo.”* At one point, Angelina described delivering a presentation to a group of users that had been particularly resistant to the supply chain system they were implementing. After communicating the benefits the new system would provide for the organisation, Angelina asked for feedback. One of the users said *“I've used the old system for twenty years... this experience will change who I am and I don't think the company has thought about that”*. Angelina admitted *“I had seen project management as about delivering technology for the benefit of the*

company. Users were just that — users.” Following the presentation though, Angelina reflected “I was gobsmacked. I had never thought about a piece of technology being that implicated in somebody's working life. But I asked around and most people felt the same way. What the hell was I doing and why didn't I see this?” The impact of Angelina's project has been called into question and, along with it, Angelina has entered the space of existential anxiety by calling into question her own function as a project manager.

Peter, Alan and Angelina have each experienced a disruption to their conventional way of being in project management practice. Having begun their projects in a state of familiarity, one in which issues were raised and dealt with in the context of average everydayness (see Section 5.2), each has suffered a moment of existential anxiety. In this moment of anxiety, their practice of project management has become explicit to them. For Peter: “every principle... was now suspect”. For Alan: “I couldn't fit it into my world-view at all”. And, for Angelina: “What the hell was I doing?” These are not questions asked within a practice, but questions asked *of* a practice. The following section will turn to how such questioning can be used as the basis of the practice of focusing.

5.2. Articulation

As discussed earlier, existential anxiety disrupts common sense language. (Gendlin (1996). In Gendlin's terms, when a practitioner ‘focuses’ on the ‘felt sense’ of their anxiety, they put themselves in a position to articulate the meaning of that anxiety for themselves, as practitioners.

5.2.1. Peter

In Peter's case, his feelings of existential anxiety 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. The steering committee had ultimately decided that Peter was to be held responsible for the delays and a new project manager assigned. In working through his ‘felt sense’ of the problem, Peter recounted: *I remember being gutted, completely gutted, you know it was like I had a hole in the middle of me somewhere.* Peter here gives a visceral expression to the anxiety he is feeling. It is not a theoretical explanation for ‘why’ he is feeling it. Instead, Peter seeks to name his problem by the way that problem is being carried physically in his body. “Gutted... like I had a hole in me” conveys a sense of Peter's emptiness and loss at his predicament far more effectively than a simple statement of facts. When he reflected further on that sense of loss and what, exactly he lost, Peter replied: *“It was dignity I suppose, you know, as if I'd been caught with my hand in the till. But then, I wasn't actually guilty of anything, was I? So why did I feel that way?”* Peter's ‘felt sense’ of his anxiety has led him to a new understanding of his problem, one that he had not yet previously considered. That is, he carried a sense of guilt about the failure of the project, even though he had no clear idea of what it was that he could have done differently.

5.2.2. Alan

The retrenchment of a number of his project team because the “resource numbers didn't meet some magical profile” left Alan deeply ambivalent about his function. During the course of the conversation Alan described “being bone weary, so desperately tired of it all. I had built this team only to have it taken away, even though we knew they were needed.” Like Peter, Alan is focusing on his felt sense of the problem in an attempt to articulate something that has previously been unsaid: “Yeah, it was in my bones, like the whole structure was not holding itself up.” This observation led Alan to reflect further: “it was telling me something, like it wasn't the decisions themselves, because they were rational, it was the model leading us to them — because the model was old and tired, a bit like me!” Alan's process of articulating his disruption had centred on his feelings of uncertainty, carried “in his bones”, that led him to a moment of clarity around a resource model that had outlived its usefulness to the organisation.

5.2.3. Angelina

As outlined earlier, Angelina's existential anxiety differed from Peter and Alan in that she had deliberately sought such disruption out. This did not make it any less fundamental in the challenge that it posed for her: “when the users started peppering us with issues, about how we hadn't considered them in our plans, it was like a seasick moment. The boat went up and down and my stomach turned. I thought we were doing things so well.” The physical sensation Angelina has focused on is one of profound dislocation, induced by the realisation that her familiar way of doing things had not produced anything like the results expected. Angelina pondered further on in the conversation that “it was the stomach churning that made me realise how bad things were. They were talking to us like outsiders, because we had acted like outsiders.” An examination of the ‘felt sense’ of Angelina's problem has enabled her to author a new definition for her anxiety, that of an outsider in her own organisation.

In the course of the conversations with the researcher, Peter, Alan and Angelina each focused on the ‘felt sense’ of their existential anxiety. Whilst the description here of the process of focusing is necessarily brief, there was in fact much going backwards and forwards over the terms used by each of them to describe what they were carrying physically within themselves. The moment of articulation generally carried with it a sense of relief that what they had been struggling with had finally been named. For Peter, that naming revolved around the expression of ‘guilt’, a feeling that surprised him, as he had not initially thought of his problem in those terms. For Alan, the terms “tired” and “old” resonated for him and identified the source of his discomfort with a particular way he felt forced to work that had become outdated. Finally for Angelina, the handle of ‘outsider’ had struck home, and captured the essence of the manner in which her team had identified with the project objectives more than the organisation and its people.

5.3. Liberation/transformation — redescription

Rorty makes this point clearly about hermeneutics: “Discourse [with the other] is supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.” (Rorty, 1979:12).

5.3.1. Making the practice explicit

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).

5.3.1.1. Peter. Peter acknowledges that he did not (at the time of the conversation) see a way ‘past’ his existential questioning. Though he was able to articulate, to some degree, his felt sense of the problem he was experiencing, Peter was unable to gain the liberation of redescribing his experience. “*I was stuck*” he admitted, “*I didn't think it was fair how things had gone and that I had to lose my job. I decided I wasn't going to be a project manager for a while, that it wasn't for me.*” The guilt that Peter had named through the process of focusing did not sit well with him. As he put it “*why should I feel guilty when it wasn't my fault?*” Though he had clearly articulated the felt sense of his existential anxiety, he was not yet ready to accept that articulation.

5.3.1.2. Alan. The conversation with Alan had helped to capture the felt sense of his existential anxiety, and to name it. ‘Old’ and ‘tired’ were terms he now associated with a particular way he had been forced to do work, in this case, the way his organisation managed their resources. Alan’s insight led him to radically question this method of work: “*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.*” Alan began redescribing their resource management in a new way, one that did not carry with it the same connotations of a ‘model’ applied over the top of reality, and argued they should “*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.*” Alan was successful in his redescription. The term ‘ready-reaction’ began to catch-on and was taken up by other managers, even though no formal change was made to the resource management system.

Alan noted during the conversation: “*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.*” Over time, Alan noticed

that the new way of speaking about resource management had led to a different result: “*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 redescribe the formal project management concept of resource management in which he and his team were engaged came about through an attunement to the disruption that the language was causing. As Alan succinctly puts it, when “*reality seemed to intrude*” the inadequacy of the language was exposed. 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 redescription 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 description eventually allowed Alan and his colleagues to liberate themselves from a mode of working that had outlived its usefulness and achieve the outcome they were seeking.

5.3.1.3. Angelina. A less direct, but equally effective use of redescription was made by Angelina in her supply chain project. Having given the handle of ‘outsider’ to her existential anxiety, Angelina set about trying to address the situation. She had noticed in her frequent conversations with the end users of the system, that they made extensive use of the word “experience”. However, as Angelina put it: “*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!*” As the project progressed though, Angelina recognised an opportunity to turn this particular description to her advantage: “*They [the end users] started talking 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.*” Angelina began using the same piece of redescription, co-opting the word ‘experience’ to deliver a positive message about the benefits of the system to the everyday users of the system. Angelina noted that: “*An organisation does not ‘experience’ a system, people do. 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.*” Ultimately, it was Angelina’s identification and labelling of the felt sense of her anxiety as an ‘outsider’ that led her to the redescription of ‘experience’. Once Angelina understood that the project had focused on the functional aspects of delivery to the organisation, at the expense of the experiential delivery to the user, was she able to take advantage of a new description.

5.4. The wisdom of conversations

It became clear during his dialogue with the researcher that Peter was still very much in the space of disruption or, to put it in Gendlin’s terms, he was still trying to put a handle on the felt

sense of his disruption. Peter has not yet moved to the state of dwelling in the space of his anxiety and accepting his articulation of it. Ultimately, Peter is unsuccessful in his attempts to respond to his disruption and slips into a defensive mode of being that limits his ability to positively transform his situation. By contrast, Alan's insight into the limitations of the project management resource model he was attempting to utilise highlights a significant theme of EHP in the context of work practice. The idea of different perspectives being driven by the nature of the language available within a specialist area is evident in Alan's observations. Likewise, Angelina's adoption of the term 'experience' and reusing it in a different way, highlights the impact of using familiar terms in unfamiliar ways. The practical coping (hermeneutics) that is offered by Rorty's philosophy of ironic redescription allows both Alan and Angelina to progress beyond a simple attunement to their situation by actively redescribing it. (Rolfe et al., 2016).

As discussed in Section 3.4, the disruptive effect of using old terms in new and unfamiliar ways is what the ironic project manager seeks and sees as necessary in her personal and professional projects of self-creation. 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 in the context of our practices, but we are free to play with that vocabulary. The alternative to ironism 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 (Williams, 2003).

Ultimately, what determines the success of a new description in becoming part of our language and our beliefs is not the descriptions apparently 'better' correspondence with reality but rather its sheer usefulness. The usefulness of the description is determined by how well it integrates with already established terms and whether it provides us with more interesting ways of thinking of ourselves. Such was the process undertaken by Alan and Angelina in the context of their projects, when the new descriptions they developed through their conversations proved more useful than the ones that had gone before. In the Darwinian scheme that Rorty borrows, the description they provided survived to become 'truths' because it proved the most useful to their projects for dealing with their reality (Rorty, 1982).

6. Conclusions

In this paper we have demonstrated how EHP allows for the transformation of what from a scientific point of view seems like an anomaly into a central part of the lived experience of managing projects: dealing with the surprise of unexpected disruptions is central to being a manager of projects. The temporality of moments of disruptive surprises are neither experiences to be avoided nor are they indicators that something has "gone wrong" with the project. They are not occasions for self-doubt in a project manager. On the contrary, they are opportunities for re-imagining a project and thus for

disclosing hitherto unexpected possibilities for the realisation of the project.

EHP allows us to argue for encouraging managers of projects to include the wisdom for anticipating surprise as a basis for disclosing new possibilities as a core competency of managing projects. We have called such a competency "the wisdom of conversation." As has been demonstrated, excellence in this competency is articulated through several EHP dimensions: embracing the felt sense of niggling doubts that have not yet been named, naming the felt sense through getting a handle on the felt sense, questioning habitual and routine ways of doing and thinking about ways of doing things in particular project situations and encouraging novel and useful ways of doing things to arise. These are all part of the wisdom of conversation as working through a felt sense requires conversation both as a dialogue with oneself and with others who are part of the project. Again, these conversations for disclosing new possibilities by working through disruptions are part and parcel of the everyday lived experience of managers and thus should be included in theorising and educating project managers.

EHP provides the framework within which to develop an epistemology of project managing which includes the wisdom of conversational practice. It allows project manager researchers to align with the lived experience of project management practice by going beyond nomothetic views which assume that managing a project can be understood in law-like scientific terms. The critique of the assumption of law-like science in theorising project management does not mean the exclusion of science but its inclusion as one form of conversation in the context of the wisdom of conversation. For wise conversations begin where both theorists and practitioners realise that the kind of conversation depends on the kind of surprise in the lived experience of managing a project rather than in an a priori commitment to one form of conversation. Where circumstances necessitate project managers need to be scientific but where situations require, project managers need to learn the hermeneutic craft of transforming their way of being in a project. Such situational attunement is key to EHP. Being able to work with a plurality of conversations should not be understood as a form of relativism but as embracing the contingency of the temporal nature of living in a project.

Conflict of interest

The authors of this paper certify that all authors have seen and approved the final version of the manuscript being submitted. They warrant that the article is the author's original work, hasn't received prior publication and isn't under consideration for publication elsewhere. The authors further warrant that there are no financial or personal interests that could affect their objectivity in the preparation of this manuscript.

References

- Bernstein, R., 2003. Rorty's inspirational liberalism. In: Guignon, C., Hiley, D. (Eds.), *Richard Rorty*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Chia, R., Holt, R., 2006. Strategies as practical coping: a Heideggerian perspective. *Organ. Stud.* 27 (5), 635–655.
- Cicmil, S., 2006. Understanding project management practice through interpretative and critical research perspectives. *Proj. Manag. J.* 37 (2), 27–37.
- Cope, J., 2011. Entrepreneurial learning from failure: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *J. Bus. Ventur.* 26, 604–623.
- Dall’Alba, G., Sandberg, J., 2014. A phenomenological perspective on researching work and learning. In: Billett, S., Harteis, C., Gruber, H. (Eds.), *International Handbook of Research in Professional and Practice-based Learning*. Springer, Dordrecht, Netherlands, pp. 279–304.
- Finch, H.L., 1995. Wittgenstein. Element, U.S.A.
- Frazier, B., 2006. The ethics of rortian redescription. *Philos. Soc. Crit.* 32 (4), 461–492.
- Galvin, K., Todres, L., 2012. The creativity of unspecialisation: a contemplative direction for integrative scholarly practice. In: Friesen, N., Henriksson, C., Saevi, T. (Eds.), *Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Education: Method and Practice*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 107–118.
- Gendlin, E., 1981. *Focusing*. Bantam Books, New York.
- Gendlin, E., 1996. *Focusing-oriented Psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method*. Guilford Press, New York.
- Heidegger, M., 1985. *Being and Time*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Hill, L.A., 2003. *Becoming a Manager: How New Managers Master the Challenges of Leadership*. Penguin Books, Boston.
- Koestenbaum, P., 1978. *The New Image of the Person: The Theory and Practice of Clinical Philosophy*. Greenwood Press, Connecticut.
- Meyers, M., 2016. Hermeneutics in the Organization. In: Mir, R., Willmott, H., Greenwood, M. (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy in Organization Studies*. Milton Park, Oxon.
- Reich, B., Sauer, C., Yong Wee, S., 2008. Innovative practices for IT projects. *Inf. Syst. Manag.* 25, 266–272.
- Rolfe, B., 2011. Reflect or defend? Project management as an existential response to organisational crisis. *Philos. Manag.* 10 (3), 59–78.
- Rolfe, B., Segal, S., 2011. Opening the space of the project manager: a phenomenological approach. *Philos. Manag.* 10 (1), 43–60.
- Rolfe, B., Segal, S., Cicmil, S., 2016. An existential hermeneutic philosophical approach to project management. *Proj. Manag. J.* 47 (3), 48–62.
- Rorty, R., 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Rorty, R., 1982. *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Rorty, R., 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sandberg, J., Tsoukas, H., 2016. Practice theory: what it is, its philosophical base, and what it offers organization studies. In: Mir, R., Willmott, H., Greenwood, M. (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy in Organization Studies*. Routledge, London.
- Segal, S., 1995. Meaning crisis: philosophical counseling and psychotherapy. In: Lahav, R., Tillmanns, M. (Eds.), *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*. University Press of America, Lanham, Md., pp. 118–123.
- Segal, S., 1999. The existential conditions of explicitness: an Heideggerian perspective. *Stud. Contin. Educ.* 21 (1), 73–89.
- Segal, S., 2015. *Management Practice and Creative Destruction: Existential Skills for Enquiring Managers, Researchers and Educators*. Gower Publishing, Surrey.
- Segal, S., Jankelson, C., 2016. *Face to Face with Practice: Existential Forms of Research for Management Inquiry*. Routledge; London.
- Smith, J., Flowers, P., Larkin, M., 2009. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. Sage, London.
- Todres, L., Wheeler, S., 2001. The complementarity of phenomenology, hermeneutics and existentialism as a philosophical perspective for nursing research. *Int. J. Nurs. Stud.* 38 (1), 1–8.
- Tomkins, L., Simpson, P., 2015. Caring leadership: a Heideggerian perspective. *Organ. Stud.* 36 (8), 1013–1031.
- Van Der Hooft, B., 2015. Playing projects: identifying flow in the ‘lived experience’. *Int. J. Proj. Manag.* 33 (5), 1008–1021.
- Van Der Hooft, B., Whitty, S., 2015. A Heideggerian paradigm for project management: breaking free of the disciplinary matrix and its Cartesian ontology. *Int. J. Proj. Manag.* 33 (4), 721–734.
- Watson, T., 2001. *In Search of Management: Culture, Chaos and Control in Managerial Work*. Thomson; London.
- Williams, M., 2003. Rorty on knowledge and truth. In: Guignon, C., Hiley, D. (Eds.), *Richard Rorty*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Zundel, M., 2013. Walking to learn: rethinking reflection for management learning. *Manag. Learn.* 44 (2), 109–126.