Projects-as-practice:
A Deweyan perspective

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Abstract

This article contributes a practice-based approach to Project Management by opening up to the messiness and unpredictabilities involved in actually doing project work. Drawing on the Pragmatist ideas of John Dewey, we theorize projects-as-practices (noun) and projects-as-practice (verb) as complementary concepts that are built respectively on ontologies of *being* and *becoming*. For the purposes of this paper, we define the notion of 'project' as an emergent social process of *becoming*, bounded in time and space, and generative of novel outcomes. We also contribute methodologically by proposing Dewey's 'Inquiry' as a guide to shadowing the bounded becomingness of projects-as-practice (verb). Using an empirical illustration from a Health and Social Care Partnership in Scotland, we highlight the inherently emergent nature of projects as they bring about transformational change.

Introduction

The enduring challenge facing contemporary Project Management researchers is how to address the perceived gap between the growing body of knowledge that seeks to prescribe 'best practice' Project Management, and the real-life experience of project practitioners as they organize, lead, and manage projects from inception to delivery. Cicmil and colleagues (2006) have responded to critiques of the traditional, rationalistic approach to Project Management with its narrow focus on models, charts and standardized procedures by establishing a 'Rethinking Project Management' initiative. Their objective is to outline a broader research agenda that delves into the 'actuality' of Project Management experiences in order to enrich and extend the field and improve 'real-world practice' (see also Winter, Smith, Morris, & Cicmil, 2006). In further recognition of the need to reconcile theory and practice, Geraldi & Söderlund (2018) have recently proposed widening the scope of project studies to transcend conventional levels of analysis and embrace alternative approaches to researching projects. This emerging research agenda invites a change in focus away from deriving theories purely through scientific

rationality, which arguably widens the gap between academic theorizing and the experience of practitioners. Instead it shifts our focus towards a new form of practical rationality – that is "theories that, insofar as they explore how organizational practices are constituted and enacted by actors, capture essential aspects of the logic of practice" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011: 339).

The early signs of such a shift are illustrated, for instance, in the framework proposed by Winter et al. (2006). They identify three future research directions for theorizing Project Management: (1) theory **about** practice, which seeks to understand practice but does not automatically have practical application; (2) theory **for** practice, which provides immediate practical application; and (3) theory **in** practice, which refers to how practitioners learn their craft and how they use theory to guide and reflect on their practice. Bredillet et al. (2015) have further extended these ideas by suggesting two additional research directions: (4) theory **from** practice, which includes knowledge from, and knowing in, practice, and (5) theory **as** practice, which refers to knowing as practicing. This diversity of options for practical theorizing, however, simply reinforces the ongoing definitional problems facing Project Management scholars as they seek to bridge the chasm between theory and practice.

This same problem is equally apparent in the wider organization studies literature (e.g. Bredillet et al., 2015; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), where it has led to a flourishing of interest in practice-based perspectives (Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009) especially in disciplines such as strategy (Whittington, 2006), organizational learning (Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003; Orlikowski, 2002), technology (Orlikowski, 2000) and leadership (Raelin, 2016). Paralleling these developments, there is also a nascent literature that explores projects-as-practice (Blomquist, Hallgren, Nilsson, & Soderholm, 2010; Hallgren & Soderholm, 2011). These recent studies draw on Whittington's (2006) pleasingly alliterative typology of Praxis, Practices, and Practitioners, but unlike strategy-as-practice (e.g.Chia & Holt, 2006; Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005) or leadership-as-practice (e.g.Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016; Shotter, 2016; Simpson, 2016), the philosophical underpinnings of 'practice' remain under-explored in this field. Most Project Management scholars have so far restricted their interests to the routine, measurable practices and stabilized entities that are taken to be the constitutive elements, or building blocks, of projects. Whilst this representationalist approach may to some extent answer the call to study Project Management

from a more critical and interpretivist stance (Cicmil, 2006), it nevertheless fails to engage with those aspects of projects that are inherently relational, dynamic and emergent.

In this paper, we develop a philosophically grounded argument that seeks to elaborate the notion of projects-as-practice in terms of the situated and ongoing experience of projects in-the-making rather than as an assemblage of already-made elements. By asking what exactly 'practice' means in the context of project work, we offer an alternative and differently insightful approach to project research that engages both theory and practice in their dynamic interplay. Whereas much of the project-based research to date has been constructed from a substantialist, or *being* ontology, we set out to formulate a processual view that is based in an ontology of *becoming* (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). A key contribution that we offer then is to reformulate projects not in the familiar terms of milestones and resources, but rather as a perpetual process of novelty-generation and change. Our argument draws on the philosophical assumptions of American Pragmatism, which is fundamentally concerned with developing practical accounts of knowing-as-doing in the everyday social experience of living and working together. As such, we see Pragmatism as the quintessential metaphysical resource for practice-based research (Simpson, 2018). In particular, we take inspiration from John Dewey's understanding of 'Inquiry' as a social learning process (1938), and also from his later work with Arthur Bentley (1949 [1960]), which explores self-action, inter-action, and trans-action as different categories of social agency. We offer a further contribution by developing the methodological implications of this conceptual approach as a way of engaging directly with the messiness of actual practice.

We begin in the next section by exploring different understandings of 'practice' and identifying some core principles that underpin practice theory, also reflecting on how practice is currently being used within the Project Management literature. We then develop a Dewey-inspired conceptualization of projects-as-practice and consider how this might draw theory and practice closer together within project research. Having outlined our theoretical position, we propose 'Inquiry' as a methodological guide to conducting research into emergent project situations. We then illustrate its application by shadowing a specific project situation relating to the provision of Mental Health Services by a newly formed Scottish Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP).

Unpacking Practice

A practice lens offers much to the study of organizations, organizing, and organizers, but the conceptual complexity that it brings needs to be thoroughly teased out if it is to realize its full potential. Reflecting this challenge, Orlikowski (2010) argues that there are three different modes through which organization researchers currently engage with the notion of practice: firstly as an empirical phenomenon that looks at what is actually happening; secondly as a theory-building perspective that is centered on practices; and thirdly as a philosophy that recognizes practice as both constituted by and constitutive of social and organizational realities. Arguably, all three modes of engagement need to be brought into play to construct a comprehensive understanding of practice. Yet as Orlikowski observes, they still tend to be treated separately in contemporary practice literature. Taking a more typological approach, Schatzki and colleagues (2001) classify the practice theories commonly used in social research into three broad categories: firstly, theories concerned with recurrent practices that influence social order through their stabilizing and equilibrating effects; secondly, theories of inner practices that attend to the embodied and psychological aspects of know-how, skills, and personal dispositions; and thirdly, post humanist accounts of practice, which challenge the assumed centrality of human agents, suggesting that practice precedes and informs the emergence of individual consciousness.

In this classification of theoretical approaches there is a subtle distinction between practices (noun form), which appear in the first two of these categories, and practice (verb form), which characterizes the third category. This distinction reflects Pickering's (1995) reasoning that practices (noun) should be understood as the repetitive and mechanistic routines undertaken by defined agents in specific circumstances, whereas practice (verb) relates to an ontologically different worldview that attends to continuously flowing and entangled agencies. To further develop our argument then, we need to make a distinction between projects-as-practices (noun), which is concerned with the various routines and entities that are engaged in projects, and projects-as-practice (verb), which attends to the ongoingness of projects as socially engaged emergent processes. These two perspectives imply different ontological and epistemological framings, which in turn demand different research approaches. So, whereas practices (noun) may be best examined through a substantialist ontology of *being*, researching practice (verb) demands a relational and processual ontology of *becoming*. In our reading of the literature, it seems that

there is already an established body of work that examines projects-as-practices (noun), but projects-as-practice (verb) remains largely undeveloped. This then, is the research opportunity that we wish to grasp, but it immediately raises questions about how to build a coherent set of philosophical assumptions that can support empirical engagement with the movements and flows of unfolding practice.

Lalonde et al. (2010), in their elaboration of different types of theory-practice links in Project Management, propose that it may be possible to accomplish an integration of theory and practice by drawing on insights from Pragmatism. Similarly, in Feldman & Orlikowski's (2011) exploration of theory and practice, the imprint of Pragmatist thinking is very evident in their commitment to situated action, the mutually constitutive nature of relations, and the rejection of dualisms, although they do not make explicit reference to any of the classical Pragmatist writers. We concur with these authors that the Pragmatists have left a significant intellectual legacy that is of considerable value, especially for engaging with practice (verb), but there is still much to be mined from this canon that might enrich and deepen our practical theorizing of practice as *becoming*. For this paper, our starting point is Dewey & Bentley's (1949 [1960]) efforts to find a new language for the human experience of knowing, a language that does not automatically bifurcate into the experienc*ed* and experienc*ing*. Dewey & Bentley developed their thinking around three categories of human action, - self-action, inter-action, and trans-action - each of which is built on a distinctive set of assumptions about practice(s).

Self-action, they argued, assumes that things, or entities, act independently and are restrained neither by each other nor by structures and social norms. This expression of action arises in Project Management studies that focus on the 'project practitioner' who is assumed to have the agentic capacity to exercise free will in determining project outcomes. Their second expression of action, inter-action, relates to a dyadic world where entities have a direct mechanistic impact on each other, impose forces on each other, and yet remain largely unchanged in themselves. In the case of Project Management, we would argue those studies that seek to understand the inter-relations, linkages and influences of practices reflect an inter-actional approach. Both self-action and inter-action are philosophically grounded in an ontology of *being*, which privileges stable entities, or practices, before flux and flow. Research methods that are most suitable for these forms of action seek to accurately represent the practices of these entities.

Dewey and Bentley's final expression of action, trans-action, differs fundamentally from self-action and inter-action because of its commitment to an ontology of *becoming*. Trans-action, "understood as unfractured observation – just as it stands, at this era of the world's history, with respect to the observer, the observing and the observed" (Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1960]: 104), offers a processual view of project organizing that engages with the unfolding experience of agencies in the *becoming* of a project. It is concerned with the flow of the situation, which is populated not by static stable entities as in self-action or inter-action, but by material and non-material phenomena that are themselves fluid, mutable and mutually constituting. Taking this approach to practice raises difficult methodological questions about how best to capture projects as they emerge and evolve in the flow of practice. In modern Western cultures in particular, we are deeply conditioned to see the world in terms of fixed elements (nouns), leading to what Whitehead (1925 [1967]: 51) refers to as the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', whereby the vibrancy of human experience is reduced to artificial abstractions. Towards solving this problem, William James (another Pragmatist) proposed radical empiricism as a method of apprehending a world in motion, a world understood in terms of verbs, through practical immersion in the flow of practice, unmediated by theoretical constructs or abstractions (James, 1912 [2006]).

These three expressions of human action offer alternative ways of researching projects-as-practice(s), each drawing on fundamentally different philosophical assumptions. Self-action focusses solely on the practices of the project-practitioner; inter-action attends to the routines and structures of project practices; and trans-action is concerned with the emergent dynamics of projects in the ongoing flow of practice. Table 1 summarizes the links we see between this action-based approach to practice and other categorizations of practice theory.

Table 1 A comparison of alternative framings of practice(s)

Dewey and Bentley	Schatzki et al.	Pickering	Ontology
Self-action The project practitioner	Inner practices	Practices (noun)	Being
Inter-action Project practices	Practices and social order	Practices (noun)	Being
Trans-action Projects in the flow of practice	Post humanist theories of practice	Practice (verb)	Becoming

A projects-as-practice approach, we argue, transcends the theory-practice divide by concurrently theorizing practice and practicing theory, or what Lalonde et al. (2010) refer to as 'reflective

action and situated theorizing'. We have outlined how this approach to practice (verb) differs from more representationalist approaches to practices (noun), which currently dominate Project Management research. Thus, we contend that accessing the trans-actional practice of Project Management requires engagement with both the emergence, and the detailed 'doing', of projects whilst also remaining mindful of the broader historical, social, political and cultural contexts in which these situations are unfolding. This is no mean feat from an empirical perspective, requiring careful attention to the philosophical assumptions that underpin the research.

Doing 'practice' research

'Practice' and 'practices' are fundamentally different, not only in their theorizations, but also in their implications for empirical research (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Simpson, Buchan, & Sillince, 2017). The *becoming* ontology underpinning the 'practice' orientation that we have adopted in this paper requires us to find non-representational approaches to studying projects that allow us to apprehend the "ephemeral and dynamic becomingness of human experience as a continuous flow of creative action" (Garud, Simpson, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2015:13). A projects-as-practice (verb) approach necessarily rejects the methodological individualism prevalent in the field of Project Management, foregrounding instead the holistic and social nature of emergence where *becoming* is bounded in time and space due to the temporary nature of projects (Sergi, 2012).

A novel approach for studying the becomingness of projects is suggested by Dewey's theory of Inquiry (for a similar argument see Lalonde, Bourgault, & Findeli, 2012; Lorino & Mourey, 2013; Lorino, Tricard, & Clot, 2011; Martela, 2015). For him, Inquiry is "the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (Dewey, 1938: 104), which then admits new possibilities for ongoing action. Dewey outlined Inquiry as an unfolding process that is triggered by an initial sense of doubt about how to proceed in the present situation. The process continues by defining the specifics of the problem and generating options for addressing the problem by creating propositions that are tested, revised and retested in practice. The outcomes of Inquiry are what Dewey called 'warranted assertabilities', which reflect plausible futures that constitute alternative, temporarily stabilized, 'determinate situations'. They are like 'best guesses' that are useful in anticipating

what will happen next, guiding actions that are 'good enough' to move the present situation forward. Whilst describing Inquiry in terms of phases, Dewey was clear that these need not follow each other in strict sequential order. Core to Dewey's beliefs is that there is no absolute 'truth' to be discovered through Inquiry and that any assertions are acknowledged to be both "temporary and fallible" (Lorino et al., 2011:778) as they introduce new doubts that may in turn become triggers for future Inquiries.

Central to Inquiry is the concept of 'the situation' that is transformed. In commonplace usage, 'situation' is understood to mean a single moment in time, a meeting or an event that is restricted in time and space, implying fixed boundaries that are inconsistent with a *becoming* worldview. Here we subscribe to an alternative, Pragmatist view of 'situation', as a unified whole in relation to a specific issue rather than "a single object or event or set of objectives or events. For we never experience nor form judgements about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole." (Dewey, 1938: 66). In other words, rather than considering a situation as an isolated event that is static and unchanging, a more processual, 'practice' view considers the situation as an emergent whole where the environment, people and objects are all co-constituting. For example, a class at university might be considered a situation that evolves over time, unfolding in the interplay between the lecturer, learning materials, students, administrators, teaching facilities and potential employers, and probably experienced differently by all those involved. Ultimately therefore, practice is continuously constituted by the interweaving of multiple, dynamic situations.

Informed by a Deweyan understanding of Inquiry and situation, we propose following, or shadowing, the unfolding of situations as a novel methodological approach to studying the *becoming* of projects. According to McDonald (2005:458), shadowing "has the ability to capture the brief, fragmented, varied, verbal and interrupted nature of organizational life" and it is "the method *par excellence* for studying how actors enact organizations through interactions in everyday situations" (Vasquez, Brummans, & Groleau, 2012:145). Shadowing offers a way of engaging with the dynamic, immediate and transient nature of organizing, while also addressing some of the problems faced when conducting traditional ethnographies in organizations such as the need to become a fully participating member of the group, the requirement for prolonged periods of immersion, and the difficulties of needing to be in more than one place at the same

time (Czarniawska, 2007). By far the most prevalent use of shadowing is to follow people, although interest in materiality has led to studies shadowing objects (Latour, 1999) and projects (Vasquez et al., 2012). Whilst there are significant overlaps with other observational methods, shadowing allows the researcher to interact with individuals, ask questions and gain access to in-the-moment interpretations of what is happening. It also allows researchers to engage directly with practice (verb); gain insights into the usually invisible, frequently mundane, aspects of work that are difficult to articulate; and observe actions embedded in the social and cultural context.

Within Project Management, the value of shadowing projects has already been recognised (Sergi, 2012), however, we propose that shadowing situations introduces a different focus for the 'shadow' that offers a broader canvas to study projects-as-practice (verb). By tracing the situation in which an Inquiry is triggered, we can engage with how and why the project emerges prior to the instigation of the formal processes of Project Management that normally signal the starting point for studying projects. Therefore, for this study, we define 'project' as a social process of *becoming*, bounded in time and space, that emerges through Inquiry, and which accomplishes novel outcomes within the trans-actions of a specific situation. This definition captures the holistic and temporal nature of projects in the flow of practice and recognizes the new, and potentially transformative nature of the warranted assertabilities generated.

In the next section, we put these principles to work as we shadow a situation that emerged in a research study conducted in one of the newly created Scottish Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCP). Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) were established as part of the Scottish Government's commitment to improve health outcomes through the better integration of community based social services with traditional health care services. Each HSCP is responsible for delivering a range of health and social care services relating to pressing social issues such as homelessness, housing, addiction, criminal justice and mental health. During the nine-month shadowing period (October 2016 until June 2017), the first author initially spent several months attending monthly full day Senior Management Team meetings and fortnightly half day Leadership Team meetings with each of three care groups (Children's, Adults' and Older People's) to orient herself to the organization, to understand more about its historical, political and social context, and to identify a situation to follow.

The situation presented here concerned the creation of a Five-Year Forward View for the provision of Adult Mental Health services across the city; a key strategic priority for the HSCP. This scenario met Dewey's definition of a 'situation' in three ways: it was being experienced as a concrete problem by those working in the organization; it brought together past experiences of delivering mental health services with the potential for a different future; and it represented a unified whole in relation to the specific challenges of providing mental health services to a diverse population. This situation was subsequently followed as it unfolded.

In addition to attending the Adult care group leadership meetings, empirical material was gathered through observations of five project specific meetings (c.10 hours), individual discussions with key managers, and the collation of relevant documents. The primary actors involved in this situation were a core group of six managers: Stuart, Head of Strategy & Operations; three Heads of Adult Services, Jane, Charles and Gillian; the Planning Manager, Chris; and James who was the Medical Director. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the research, and it was agreed that names would be changed to ensure the anonymity of those involved in the study. Due to the sensitive and political nature of the meetings observed, audio-recording was not permitted so each meeting was described using detailed field notes plus personal reflections. Where possible, specific conversations were replicated in their entirety but when this was not feasible due to the speed that the conversations were moving, the content of the dialogue was noted in summary form.

To illustrate how the project unfolded within the situation shadowed, we used the phases of Inquiry as unbounded guides to draw attention to the emergent dynamics in the empirical material. Far from being a linear succession of neat transitions between distinct phases, Dewey (1938) himself recognized that the phases of Inquiry were complexly interpenetrating and continuously generative. Moreover, processual research is necessarily performative as the researchers participate in co-producing the movements of Inquiry. Therefore, the insights generated in this study emerged from travelling with the unfolding phases of Inquiry rather than seeking to represent accurately the stages that characterize more traditional project management research. Our analysis highlights that the formal instigation of a 'project' to agree and implement a new strategic direction for mental health services emerged nearly eight months after the shadowed situation was triggered by doubt about the continuing viability of existing ways of

providing mental health services. By February 2017 when the wider project team met for the first time, an Inquiry was already underway and early attempts to problematize and develop propositions to address the issues were being surfaced.

The Unfolding of an Inquiry

The issue of mental health service provision is recognised within the health and social care professions as intractable, a 'wicked problem' that is neither easily defined nor simply addressed (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The entangled nature of the causes of mental illness alongside the growing number of people experiencing poor mental health in Scotland underpins the challenges faced by the HSCP in identifying a strategic direction for the provision of services. These inherent difficulties were exacerbated by several internal challenges. Whilst having strategic oversight for mental health services, the Adult Leadership Team was responsible only for the operational management of services to adults while services to the Children's and Older People's care groups were delivered by their own respective Leadership Teams. Mental health issues were also pervasive among people using other support services delivered by the Adult Leadership Team, namely homelessness, addictions, sexual health, prison healthcare and police custody. The already complex environment in which this situation emerged was further intensified by the need to achieve substantial financial savings across all aspects of the Adult Services budget.

As this study began, there was already a recognition in the HSCP that there was a need to make radical changes in the provision of mental health services, with Stuart observing that *"the Chief Officer is looking for transformational change"*. Conversations with key actors suggested that this uncertainty about the effectiveness of existing services had emerged over many months but had not progressed beyond a nagging sense of doubt. By shadowing the unfolding situation, we were able to follow the progression through the pattern of Inquiry that brought about transformative change; and to explore the instigation of a formal project within this dynamic process.

The triggering of Inquiry
A workshop in May 2016 was identified by three members of the Adult Leadership Team as the trigger for growing unease about the feasibility of continuing to provide mental health services using existing service mechanisms. During this session, Geoff, the retiring Head of Strategy for Adult Services, delivered a hard-hitting presentation to his team outlining how demand for

mental health services in Scotland had grown by 29% in the period 2011-2015 at a time of increasing financial austerity, and he challenged his senior managers to consider the ramifications of these trends for the ongoing delivery of service. For Stuart, this workshop was *"the origins of planting something in my mind or reinforcing in my mind that a long-term view was essential because if we were going to make any changes that were going to take time to plan for, we couldn't just turn the switch from one day to the next."* He also recognized that the criticality and the indeterminacy of the situation was foregrounded by the pressure being exerted on Adult Services to deliver year on year cost savings, *"the other thing which I think drove this was our attempts to identify savings for 17/18 and I think there was a dissatisfaction with the salami slicing and a feeling that ok we recognize that we need to make savings but actually making it this way didn't feel right."* A similar concern was expressed by Jane, one of the Heads of Adult Services, *"I understand the reasons why we were being forced to take fairly short-term approaches to the savings challenge. We could keep doing that, salami slicing is the phrase we like to use, and we could keep kind of taking that approach and being fairly arbitrary about where we take the savings from but if we kept doing that were we confident that we would be taking savings from the right places?"* Thus, there was an acknowledgement amongst those senior managers within Adult Services that the existing approach of 'salami slicing' to achieve short-term savings, with its potential for 'death by a thousand cuts', was no longer either a viable or desirable way to tackle the issues of providing mental health services with a reduced budget. By continually making small cuts across the service, the opportunity to consider more transformative changes was being lost.

That two members of the Adult Leadership Team, independently, cited this workshop as the initial source of their concern demonstrates that growing doubt and uncertainty was leading to the emergence of what Dewey described as an indeterminate situation. Frustration with the current approach to change built over several months, encouraged by frequent informal conversations among Stuart, Jane and James (Medical Director with responsibility for mental health) about the need for more innovative approaches. However, it was not until October 2016 that the pressure to deliver budgetary savings resulted in Jane's frustrations finally bubbling over during an Adult Leadership Team meeting where she passionately voiced her concerns about the short-termism of current savings proposals. She reflected on this scenario, *"I was saying, you know, I really don't think this is the way we should be doing this and I think, if I'm asking myself*

these questions, even if other people aren't asking them out loud, I'm sure other people must be thinking the same way and would it not be possible for us to sit down and take a view on our strategic direction." In response to her outburst, Stuart asked her to lead the process of defining a strategy for mental health services, so she immediately spoke to a few people after the meeting, agreed who would be the most sensible people to get in a room and set up a meeting.

Therefore, despite recognizing as early as May 2016 the inability of past service delivery models to meet future demands, it was not until the autumn that an Inquiry was triggered. At this point, through informal conversations primarily between Stuart, Jane and James, there was an explicitly voiced agreement that "there is something seriously the matter, some trouble, due to active dissonance, dissentiency, conflict among the factors of a priori non-intellectual experience" (Dewey, 1916: 11) and that action was now required to understand the problem in greater detail.

Defining the Problem

According to Dewey (1938:107), "the first result of evocation of inquiry is that the situation is taken, adjudged, to be problematic." The problematic nature of the situation was first mooted in May 2016, yet it was not until October that a small working group consisting of Jane, Stuart, James, and Chris met to capture their existing understanding of the problem in a document, the 'Five-Year Forward View for Mental Health'. Drawing on UK benchmarking data, specific geographical benchmarking data for each Scottish authority, demand details for Mental Health services, demographics and financial savings targets, the group made the case for transformational change. The paper outlined the problem in stark terms: intense budgetary pressures meant that mental health services faced unprecedented clinical and workforce challenges; the gap between demand for services and the resources available to meet these demands was growing exponentially; and the existing system was inefficient and was not always providing the best care for those using the services. As Stuart observed, *"we've identified that the existing system is suboptimal, so we need to be honest about our need to address existing inefficiencies and less than optimal outcomes for patients."*

The draft Five-Year Forward View document was discussed at the Adult Leadership Team meetings in November and December to achieve alignment around the core messages in the document. These were, however, highly contested discussions with many new triggers raising challenges about the need to consider the wider mental health system beyond the HSCP, the need

to link to other services such as drugs and alcohol and the need to consider prevention and recovery in addition to treatment. The outcome of the discussions was an agreement that, whilst there were many intricacies still to consider, the Five-Year Forward View offered a reasonable reflection of the problems, represented the 'direction of travel' and should form the basis for future action. Thus, the sense of doubt articulated in numerous informal conversations flowed into a more explicitly defined problematic situation. This process occurred in parallel with tentative discussions about what might constitute alternative future approaches that were clinically appropriate, palatable to clinicians and would achieve the required cost savings across the system. It was only at this juncture in the Inquiry (December 2016) that Chris, Planning Manager, began to mention his desire to move the discussions onto a formal Project Management footing; a suggestion, mooted and agreed at the Adult Leadership Team in January 2017. This led to the creation of the Mental Health Strategy Group with responsibility for setting up and managing the project.

Generating Options

Initially there seemed to be only limited options available to the Mental Health Strategy Group to address the challenge of delivering improved services to more people for less money. Stuart explained the 'headline' options, *"we've got two choices: we either cut in-patients and build up community or we protect in-patients and decimate community. The second scenario would strangle the whole system within a very short space of time and is obviously counter-intuitive."* James reiterated the devastating consequences of the second option, *"the sums of money coming out of community would be of an extent that it wiped out effective service. It would be like a meteor strike that we were looking at, so we thought, this isn't doable."* Even before our fieldwork commenced, and as was evident at the first observed conversation around the Five-Year Forward View, there was already tacit agreement that the only credible option was to reduce beds and invest in community services. Thus, movement towards transforming an ambiguous situation had begun well in advance of the instigation of the formal project. The focus of the project team was on developing the detailed options that would enable the HSCP to achieve this shift in the balance of care.

During the first Mental Health Strategy Group project meeting in February 2017, the conversation focused on creating a programme plan that would move from high-level themes to

developing detailed, implementable recommendations. This was a noticeable shift from the preceding conversations at the Adult Leadership Team meetings and reflected agreement with a broad direction of travel. Once again, the Five-Year Forward View was positioned as a core contributor to the process, *"I would like to take forward our ideas into a work programme with detailed activities. We need to examine the key constructs in our five-year strategy and work out how we will deliver them."* (Stuart). The group identified four specific areas that they believed warranted comprehensive review to identify actionable options: how the current system of crisis, or unscheduled care, for those suffering acute mental illness was structured and what proportion of bed occupancy was related to emergency admissions; how the scheduled care services offered in the community could be delivered more efficiently; how to transition from primarily clinical treatment models to a social care model of recovery; and finally, how more effectively prevent mental illness through early detection and intervention.

A striking feature of the discussions across the Mental Health Strategy Group project meetings was the complexity of the options under consideration and the interconnected nature of all the different work streams. Whilst seemingly clear-cut in terms of the four main areas for reform (unscheduled care, scheduled care, recovery and prevention), as the conversations progressed each of these areas expanded and subdivided and the overlaps with other work streams and projects became more apparent. Illustrative of this was that for the group to make recommendations for future unscheduled care services required separate reviews of the existing crisis teams, the out of hours community psychiatric nurse service, home treatment teams, mental health liaison services, GP out of hours cover and acute hospital admissions. The ongoing problematization of other aspects of the Mental Health service and the subsequent instigation of new work packages was indicative of the fact that projects "constantly face novelty and unexpectedness, and are prone to experience turmoil" (Sergi, 2012: 350). The continual revisiting and redefining of the problems that triggered the initial Inquiry is consistent with the backwards and forwards flow through the pattern of Inquiry that Dewey described.

Over a series of meetings, the Inquiry moved organically from the generative process of identifying strategic options to the introduction of greater focus on how these options might be implemented. This signaled a flurry of Project Management activity to create Terms of Reference for the Programme, Project Initiation Documents for the individual work streams, and

to establish a Programme Management Board with draft copies of documents presented to the Adult Leadership Team meeting for approval. This change in focus from hypothesizing about potential solutions to the application of traditional Project Management tools such as Terms of Reference and Project Initiation Documents to improve the planning, control and monitoring of the project was indicative that within the broader situation, a formal project was now underway.

Tracing the evolution of the Five-Year Forward View offered another way to follow the process of Inquiry. The Five-Year Forward View was initially positioned as a discussion document to initiate generative conversations amongst a small group of managers and, through multiple revisions, became agential in describing the problems with existing mental health services and shaping emergent options and increasingly detailed recommendations. It was the seventh version of the document that was presented to the Senior Management Team in September 2017 as a proposed strategy for addressing the uncertainties that had triggered an Inquiry some 16-months earlier. The various iterations of this document also reflected the messiness and interweaving nature of the Inquiry with options being offered in early versions whilst the accompanying conversations still wrestled with defining the problem that required addressing. Notably, the Five-Year Forward View, which was used to structure the subsequent programme plan, was already on its fifth iteration in February 2017 when the first meeting of the Mental Health project occurred.

A transformed situation

The outcome of Inquiry is a judgement that the process has run its course, the ideas have been tested, and they appear to be of use in anticipating a workable future (Brown, 2012). Given the inherent complexities in delivering mental health services to the disparate population served by the HSCP, it was not feasible to continue to shadow the Inquiry until the recommendations of the Five-Year Forward View were implemented and all the difficulties that had triggered the Inquiry had been addressed. The likelihood is that this will take several years during which new Inquiries may result in further transformational changes in project objectives and plans. However, the first deliverable of the formal project identified by the Mental Health Strategy Group was a detailed plan for the strategic direction of mental health services. This served to determine a way forward, at least for the immediate present, which will provide mental health services for the anticipated

future. As such, the indeterminate situation that triggered this Inquiry had been transformed into a new situation sufficiently determinate to admit further action.

Ultimately, the detailed options that would collectively support the shift in the balance of care from in-patient beds to community services, from treatment to care, emerged, and were refined incrementally over a period of months. The implementation of these recommendations is continuing as part of this dynamically evolving project. However, the original 'perplexity' about how to deliver better services whilst simultaneously reducing costs had been resolved, at least temporarily, with the coalescence of key stakeholders around the direction of travel for mental health services.

Discussion

The empirical materials that we have presented here attest to the dynamic and iterative messiness experienced by managers as they struggled to find a way, or ways, of responding to the 'wicked problem' of providing mental health services in a context of diverse social needs and increasing financial constraints. Taking a processual approach, we have demonstrated that the formal project developed by the Mental Health Strategy Group was just part of a broader situational transformation, but a part that cannot be sensibly separated from the practical and emergent context of the whole. It is an inevitable feature of process research that there is never a clearly defined start- or end-point to social processes; rather there is an endless continuity of *becoming*. As such, we do not claim to have identified a bounded situation that acts as a container for this specific project because there are always antecedents and consequences that exceed the limits of any given study. However, by locating the formalized project within a broader situation, we have produced insights that come closer to the actuality of lived experience in its continuous unfolding.

Further, through the lens of Inquiry we show some of the complexities of this experiential process as it engages with doubt in order to bring about situational transformation. Whilst the phases of Inquiry defined by Dewey (triggering, defining, generating, and warranted assertabilities) provide a convenient structuring rubric for presenting our findings, it is also evident that these phases are intricately interpenetrating in practice. For instance, we see new Inquiries being triggered throughout what we have labelled as the defining and generating phases, and equally, definitional details continue to emerge as options for action are being

generated. Rather than using the language of 'phases' therefore, we suggest it is more fruitful to consider these as interweaving threads of Inquiry that together constitute the ongoing continuity of practice. Separating them as we have done here should be understood purely as a heuristic device that allows us to tease out detail without losing touch with the whole situation.

Had we focused solely on the project rather than the broader situation, we might well have adopted an inter-actional, projects-as-practices (noun) approach to theorization, which would privilege the application of pre-formed tools and methods as a way of illuminating the planning and control dimensions of projects (Söderlund, 2005). However, from a trans-actional, projects-as-practice (verb) perspective, the actions taken within the time-bounded project must be located in the broader situation. In order to fully engage with this dynamic situation, it is necessary to develop research methods that are capable of moving and morphing as the situation emerges (e.g. Bal, 2002; Urry, 2007). We have responded to this need by developing a following practice that shadows the unfolding situation. This not only gives us as researchers empirical access to the changing situation, but it also allows for direct experience by intervening in the flow of practice (James, 1912 [2006]). Methods for this sort of processual research are under-developed in the organizational literature in general, and in Project Management in particular, so we offer our experience of shadowing the situation as a methodological contribution and hope others will take up these ideas to develop them further.

The Pragmatist approach that we have taken here is just one of many types of process theory that have currency in the contemporary organizational literature. These include, for instance, Latour's Actor Network Theory, Heidegger's being-in-the-world, and Barad's agential realism. All of these theories engage in one way or another with the performative dimensions of a *becoming* ontology, calling out a practice approach to theory by means of an explicit theory of practice. What distinguishes Pragmatism is firstly its commitment to the here and now. It is always interested to ask 'if this is the situation, how should we now proceed?' Secondly, it has a malleable and fluid view of truths, or warranted assertabilities, which may be discarded when they no longer provide adequate guidance about how to act in the present situation. Thirdly, Pragmatism is necessarily social, recognizing that change emerges out of the relational dynamics of trans-action. It is these qualities that we argue make Pragmatism uniquely suited as a philosophical foundation to bring theory and practice together (Simpson 2018).

Our argument also raises questions about the relationship between Project Management and Project Leadership (Packendorff, Crevani, & Lindgren, 2014). Barker (2001) suggests that whereas the purpose of management is to converge towards organizational stability and equilibrium, leadership functions as a necessary counterpoint that disrupts equilibrium by introducing novelty and change. Both management and leadership are, of course, essential for organizational sustainability, but each invokes a very different theorization. In relation to the practice(s) duality that runs throughout this paper, we suggest that management is best approached from a projects-as-practices (noun) perspective that focuses on the specific actors and reproducible patterns of action that bring a degree of regularity and certainty to projects. Leadership on the other hand, is concerned with generating transformational change, which is precisely the objective of the projects-as-practice (verb) approach that we have explored here. The performative force of Dewey's Inquiry draws attention to leadership as an ongoing social process that brings about transformation through trans-actional practice. At the same time, the traditional assumption that leaders are the source of leadership is overturned as the processual orientation of practice (verb) gives priority to the movements and flows through which leadership is accomplished and manifested in the continuity of coordinated work (Simpson, 2016).

In summary, we see projects-as-practices (noun) and projects-as-practice (verb) as two very different, but complementary perspectives on project work. Each invokes a different idiom of research (representational and performative respectively) that engages a distinct set of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. Rather than seeking some sort of grand theoretical integration of these two incommensurable perspectives, we suggest that a fuller understanding of projects resides in the interplay between them.

Conclusion

This paper responds to the perennial criticisms that the scholarly literature both in the area of Project Management, and in organization studies more generally, fails to adequately address the perceived gap between theory and practice. We approach this problem by revisiting the theorization of practice, taking inspiration from Pragmatism and especially the thinking of John Dewey. This leads us to make a distinction between projects-as-practices (noun) and projects-as-practice (verb), where we theorize the latter as an emergent process of Inquiry that transforms the

situations in which projects arise. In so doing, we have not only theorized practice, but also practiced theory, thereby emphasizing the mutually constituting dynamics that draw theory and practice together in lived experience.

The contributions that we make here are firstly, a comprehensive rethinking of what practice might mean in the context of project work. In this, we go beyond earlier work on projects-as-practice(s) (Blomquist et al., 2010; Hallgren & Soderholm, 2011), which builds on a three-part typology (Praxis, Practices, Practitioners) first introduced to the strategy-as-practice literature by Whittington (2006). We propose instead a processual theory of practice grounded in a *becoming* ontology in which projects are embedded in dynamically emergent situations. This performative conceptualization recognizes the inherently iterative and precarious nature of projects as agents, both human and material, trans-actionally produce, and are produced by, their situations. Secondly, in recognition of the methodological specificities of such a performative approach, we propose a research method that shadows an emerging situation. This allows us to engage directly with the empirical situation as suggested by James' 'radical empiricism' (1912 [2006]). From this active and immersive perspective, it is then possible to trace the unfolding of a project in the swirling movements of Inquiry.

In writing this paper, we have found Pragmatist thinking an invaluable resource that provides a comprehensive vehicle for the integration of theory, practice, and methodology. Although we recognize it is hard work to engage with philosophical writing, we see this as an essential pre-requisite to breaking through the representationalist assumptions that are ingrained in all of us. Only then will we be properly equipped to create holistic and situated theories that can be of practical use to practicing managers faced with the actuality of project work.

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