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The praxis of 'alignment seeking' in project work

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Abstract

Alignment seeking is the process of reaching agreement on what needs to be done and on the process that should be followed to complete the activity. This empirical study extends the scope of the current project-as-practice literature by providing descriptions of how project managers actually achieve alignment. Photographs taken by the research participants are used to trigger discussion in semi-structured interviews that explore the praxis of alignment seeking in project work. The practices found to enable alignment seeking include: creating a vision; storytelling; seeding ideas; identifying and using personal drivers, and appealing to stakeholders and team members' sense of a 'higher good'. This paper highlights how alignment seeking can be achieved 'in practice' by project managers.

Keywords: Project managing practice; Alignment seeking; Project managing tools; Project-as-practice

1. Introduction

This paper describes how project managers undertake the activity of 'alignment seeking' in practice. Alignment seeking is a term used by O'Leary and Williams (2013). The term refers to the process of reconciling different views amongst a project team and with stakeholders to enable project delivery. It is proposed as a key activity in mobilising action in project work (O'Leary and Williams, 2013).

This research study is grounded in the need for research that is drawn from practice that discloses the "lived experience" of project work (Blomquist et al., 2010; Winter et al., 2006). Its contribution is in the disclosure of the *actual* practices of individual practitioners (praxis – refer Section 2.2) undertaking the activity of 'alignment seeking' in their project managing. We have specifically chosen to use the term 'project managing' rather than 'project management' throughout this paper. This decision is based on the discussion, grounded in Heideggerian concepts, by van der Hoorn and Whitty (2015b) that defines 'project managing' as a far broader set of practices used in managing project work than those defined in the extant body of knowledge relating to project management. In alignment with the pragmatism of practice grounded research, pragmatically, the practices that are disclosed are the tools or equipment of the project manager. Just as a carpenter uses a hammer to join pieces of wood through hammering (Heidegger, 1967), a project manager can use a coffee shop to hold a persuasive conversation to bring about alignment amongst stakeholders.

There are ongoing calls for project management research that draws from the actual experience of practitioners (Blomquist et al., 2010; Hällgren and Soderholm, 2011; Winter et al., 2006). This is driven by a need for a plurality in perspectives on project work, particularly the need for insights that reflect the "lived experience" (Cicmil et al., 2006; Soderlund, 2013). There is also a call to avoid 'simplifying' our theorising on project work, and a need to build our understanding of the inherent complexity of organisational life (Tsoukas, 2017). These calls are driven by a desire to minimise the theory-practice divide and provide research that really matters (Blomquist et al., 2010; Tsoukas, 2017). This study seeks to contribute to the literature and practice by making a contribution to our understanding of the praxis of project managers.

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In this study, a quasi-ethnographic approach, supported through the use of semi-structured interviews is used to explore the research question. Specifically, the six research participants were asked to take photographs of their experience of project managing and these were used as stimuli for face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interviews were then transcribed and thematically analysed to disclose the praxis of alignment seeking by the research participants.

In addition to disclosing how project managers undertake alignment seeking, the study confirmed the centrality of alignment seeking in project managing. The practices (common praxis amongst the project managers) disclosed by the study included developing an understanding of stakeholders' personal drivers and interests and sharing in coffee and humour to cultivate good inter-personal relationships. 'Seeding' (or selling) ideas is also found to be a critical driver in bringing about alignment. The participants achieved this through varying praxis (individual behaviours or approaches) such as allowing stakeholders to 'discover' solutions or directions, remembering birthdays, and gradually 'unfolding' the desired project trajectory.

The structure of the article is as follows. Firstly, a summary of the extant project-as-practice literature into which this study contributes is provided. This includes the explication of the research question. This is followed by a description of the study's research methodology. The study's findings are then outlined and a discussion of the implications for theory and practice are given. Finally, a conclusion, including limitations of the study and future research directions are provided.

2. Literature review

As introduced in Section 1, there is growing interest on what is actually occurring in practice in projects (Blomquist et al., 2010; Cicmil, 2006) with the hope of decreasing the theory-practice divide. The practice-turn is focused on brining attention to situated human action (Reckwitz, 2002). This literature review provides a summary of the relevant literature relating to the 'practice-turn', including defining the terms associated with 'practice', the adoption of the 'practice-turn' in project management and more specifically the literature on the human skills element of project managing as they relate to the 'practice turn'.

2.1. The 'practice-turn' in the social sciences and organisational studies

The 'practice-turn' phenomenon emerged in the social sciences in the 1970s (Johnson et al., 2007). The movement emerged as a response to the dissatisfaction with the positivist, abstract and prescriptive research approaches of the physical sciences and a drive to shift the focus of inquiry back to human beings (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007). The philosophical foundations of the practice-turn can be seen in the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2012). Other, more contemporary scholars associated with this approach are Bourdieu, de Certeau, Foucault and Giddens (Reckwitz, 2002; Whittington, 2006).

Importantly, the practice-turn counters a subject-object split (Schatzki, 2007, 2012) which is a common theme in more traditional positivist and analytical approaches (van der Hoorn, 2016). The practice-turn approach focuses on people 'doing' activities, and the equipment involved in them, being in a reciprocal and binding relationship (Schatzki, 2012). Simplistically, the practice-turn is focused on examining *who* is involved in a particular activity, *how* they undertake that activity, and *what* they use in that activity (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). Throughout, there is a focus on what people *actually* do. As such, the practice-turn focuses on what happens in an environment on a moment-to-moment basis (Whittington, 2006).

The practice-turn is associated with a pragmatic research approach (Johnson et al., 2007). It is focused on discovering knowledge that has practical utility and application rather than deriving theoretical (abstract) findings (Johnson et al., 2007). As described by Johnson et al. (2007, p. 33):

> "In judging utility, primacy is granted to the practicing agent's point of view. Including practitioners in the research process itself is, then, not just a matter of ensuring relevance but a useful step to securing its very quality. There is no necessary trade-off between relevance and rigour."

The research methods most commonly associated with the practice-turn are ethnography writ large (Schatzki, 2012). This includes focus groups and engaging directly with subjects (human beings) and video recording (Schatzki, 2012). As described by Schatzki (2012) there is a focus on getting close to the people involved, recording intimate accounts in order to explore the mundane and 'taken-for-granted' routines of everyday life (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008).

An area of organisational and management studies that has seen the strong usage of the 'practice-turn' lens is strategy. Use of the practice-turn approach in strategy research emerged in the 1990s (Whittington, 2006). Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) argue that a 'strategy-as-practice' approach brings a focus to human agency and how strategy is enacted (done) in an organisation. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009, sec. Introduction) build on this in stating that the 'strategy-as-practice' approach brings "human actors and their interactions to the centre stage of strategy research." There is a growing body of literature in the strategy-as-practice domain and in management more broadly (refer Whittington (2011) for examples of studies). Whittington (2006, p. 618) highlights that the adoption of the strategy-as-practice approach is successful in elucidating strategy *actuality* which can have unexpected but important implications. Furthermore, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) have acknowledged that such research brings a rich understanding to specific situations rather than the development of generalisations.

2.2. Defining 'practice'

According to prominent practice-turn practitioner Schatzki, practices are: "organized nexuses of activity" (Schatzki, 2012, p. 56); they are a "set of actions". Examples of farming practices include actions such as harvesting grain, judging weather, building fences and paying for supplies (Schatzki, 2012). "The actions that compose a practice are either bodily doings and sayings or actions that these doings and sayings constitute (Schatzki, 2012, p. 56)". The ability to undertake a particular practice requires the capability to perform the relevant bodily doings and/or sayings (the actions). Reckwitz (2002, p. 251) states that "[a] practice can be understood as the regular, skilful 'performance' of (human) bodies." Whilst there may be a temptation to assume that this definition brings a 'micro' focus to a given phenomenon (the 'doing' done by an individual), a central tenant of the practice-turn is that the 'macro' (the environmental context) is fused with the 'micro' - the practices of the human being/s (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Schatzki, 2012). The actor, their broader context and their specific actions in a context are interrelated (Whittington, 2006).

This concept of bridging the theory-practice divide in project management has also been discussed by Bredillet (2013). He proposes a single class of practitioners, scholars and experts under the term 'praXitioners'. The strategy-as-practice domain has developed a framework that delineates the terms praxis, practitioner and practice (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006). This framework proposes to overcome the challenge of integrating the micro and macro elements inherent in studying 'doing'. In their framework, 'praxis' refers to a specific activity undertaken by a person in a specific situation. 'Practice' refers to the norms and more generally accepted activities that take place within a domain. 'Practitioners' are those who undertake praxis but are obviously impacted by 'practice'. These definitions are adopted in this study given their established use in a specific managerial domain using the practice-turn lens and their proposed suitability for the project discipline (Blomquist et al., 2010).

2.3. The 'practice-turn' in project management

The practice-turn approach has also been applied to project management research. Blomquist et al. (2010) and Hällgren and Soderholm (2011) provide strong arguments for the adoption of the practice-turn in project management. They discuss the foundations of the practice-turn, how it differs from previous approaches in the project management discipline and provide a detailed discussion of how it can be applied in project research. Blomquist et al. (2010) provide a 'project-as-practice' framework and demonstrates the application of the praxis, practitioner, and practice concepts from the strategy-as-practice literature in the project context. They also discuss key challenges with the approach including the relevance challenge and the pattern challenge.

In addition to the theoretical introduction, Hällgren and Soderholm (2011) provide an example of research being undertaken within a project-as-practice paradigm. They use a case study of meetings in a power plant. They argue that through the project-as-practice paradigm: "projects are seen as the sum of the actions of the people involved, which emphasises both how people involved in projects act and how their typical workdays are structured (Hällgren and Soderholm, 2011, p. 501)". Other examples of project-as-practice research are provided by Besner and Hobbs (2008), Hällgren and Söderholm (2010) and Lalonde et al. (2012). The study by Lalonde et al. (2012) has particularly strong alignment to the project-as-practice approach in that the method adopted was a single case study using ethnography with no prior assumptions being made about what may be disclosed. The phenomenon being examined was strategic meetings and through the research study a rich description of how the inquiry process of the actors involved was developed (Lalonde et al., 2012).

We also note a variety of other trajectories in the discipline that, whilst they may not explicitly link themselves with the project-as-practice method, are closely aligned. For example, the critical approaches proposed by Cicmil, Hodgson and associates have a focus on disclosing what actually occurs in projects – the "lived experience" (Cicmil, 2006; Cicmil et al., 2006; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). Additionally, as mentioned in Section 2.2, work by Bredillet and associates draws on the Aristotelian concepts of praxis, praxeology and phronesis to bring attention to what actually occurs in the 'doing' of project managing (Bredillet, 2005, 2013; Bredillet et al., 2013; Bredillet et al., 2015). Also, the value of Heideggerian and more broadly, continental philosophical perspectives for bringing a practice grounding to project management research have been proposed by van der Hoorn and Whitty (2015b) and van der Hoorn (2016).

2.4. Human skills in project managing through the practice-turn lens

A particular area of focus in the project managing 'practice-turn' has been on human skills.

By human skills, we are referring to those practices that are more commonly associated with interpersonal skills and less with technical instruments (Pollack, 2007). We note that several authors have discussed human skills as a key competency of project managers (Aitken and Crawford, 2008; Gillard, 2009; Muzio et al., 2007; Pinto, 2000; Stevenson and Starkweather, 2010; Zielinski, 2005). As such, understanding 'how' these human skills are performed in context – the doing of these skills – should be of interest to project management researchers. This section of the literature review focuses on studies that disclose the 'doing' of human skills by project managers in practice.

Koskinen and Mäkinen (2009) examine the reaching of shared understandings in three participative action research case studies. The findings focused on the use of "boundary objects" such as artefacts, documents and vocabulary that can assist in building a shared understanding in the project context. O'Leary and Williams (2013), adopting a project-as-practice perspective, undertook an ethnographic study in a single case organisation. They used sociological concepts from Strauss to interpret their observations and found that 'alignment seeking' is a key project activity. They build a theory of this from their reflection on empirical data related to key issues that arose in the project. They found that in this alignment seeking process there is an initial phase of "taking positions" and then "achieving closure". This 'alignment seeking' allows the project to be pushed forward. O'Leary and Williams (2013) comment that there is significant work involved in the process of alignment seeking, and that its absence can result in wasted time and effort.

A three-organisation action research study was undertaken by Mastrogiacomo et al. (2014). Their research was focused on how "common ground" can be restored between project stakeholders. Mastrogiacomo et al. (2014) trial the use of the Coopilot tool in these case studies. This tool (grounded in Herbert Clark's joint activity model) enables the project manager to increase their understanding of whether there is common ground between stakeholders. It was found that the use of Coopilot resulted in higher levels of confidence in project delivery and also in increased motivation. These studies share a common theme in showing the human skills required to drive project progress in terms of bringing stakeholders 'on the journey' or seeking alignment to drive progress.

The criticality of human skills has also been demonstrated in practice-grounded research on change managers (Buchanan and Badham, 1999; Buchanan, 2003). These are included here due to the lack of literature specific to project managers and are considered relevant due to their grounding in a project context. Buchanan and Badham (1999) undertook interviews with those managing organisational change. Their narratives disclose the significant 'politics' that these managers faced: "political behavior is an accepted and pervasive dimension of the change agent's role (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p. 624)". They note that the behaviours disclosed such as manipulation, and deceit whilst seeming objectionable may be justified in context.

Buchanan (2003) undertook further work in this domain. Again, the political dimensions of the change managers' work were clear. He also notes: "A lot of work in establishing support and agreement was carried out 'backstage'. Also of importance were issues concerning personal credibility, physical appearance and language (Buchanan, 2003, p. 676)". The narratives capture the human skills involved in managing change (Buchanan, 2003, p. 678):

> "I don't like to use the word manipulate, but you know, you do need to manipulate people. And I think I have strengthened those skills, which might be a bad thing. It is about playing the game. I remember being accosted by a very cross consultant who had heard something about one of the changes and he really wasn't very happy with it. And it was about, OK, how am I going to deal with this now. And it is about being able to think quickly. So I put it over to him in a way that he then accepted, and he was quite happy with. And it wasn't a lie and it wasn't totally the truth. But he was happy with it and it has gone on."

Human skills in the program management are also disclosed by Miterev et al. (2016). Miterev et al. (2016) undertook an ethnographic study (observation, interviews and document analysis) of 10 programs within a single case study organisation. Their findings include the criticality of informal influence skills (particularly where information is hard to elicit). One program manager stated:

> "[What's important to have is] influencing skills. It's normally [about] managing a number of interfaces with various projects because it's about the ability to create a purpose across a number of different groups (Miterev et al., 2016, Sec. 4.1.1)."

2.5. Literature summary and research question

This literature review has found that there is strong support for a 'practice-turn' approach in project management. However, as Svejvig and Andersen (2015) highlight, there is still a relatively small amount of empirical research on the social and political, and the actuality of project work. Additionally, there is strong interest in the human skills aspects of project managing with relatively few studies on the 'doing' of these skills. As such, there is an opportunity to contribute empirical studies that focus on the 'doing' of human skills in project managing. O'Leary and Williams (2013) study highlighted the criticality of alignment seeking in pushing project work forward. It is proposed that further exploration of 'how' this can be achieved by project managers would be particularly valuable for the discipline. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to make a contribution to the understanding of 'how' project manager's 'do' alignment seeking.

The research question is:

> *How* do project managers undertake the activity of alignment seeking in their projects?

3. Research methodology

3.1. Methodology

Given the nature of the research question and the grounding in the project-as-practice literature, an interpretivist ontology underpins this study. Such a paradigm has been recommended as suitable for this type of research (Cicmil, 2006; van der Hoorn, 2016) and has been used in similar project management studies such as van der Hoorn and Whitty (2015a), Hällgren and Soderholm (2011) and Smith (2006). In this section, the research method (including data analysis) will be explained.

3.2. Research method

A qualitative research method is appropriate for an interpretivist research paradigm (Bryman and Bell, 2003; Saunders et al., 2009; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006) — refer to Fig. 1. A qualitative method is also strongly associated with the practice-turn lens (Blomquist et al., 2010; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). As such, case study research, ethnography and interviews are all considered suitable for this type of study (Hällgren and Soderholm, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Saunders et al., 2009; Schatzki, 2012).

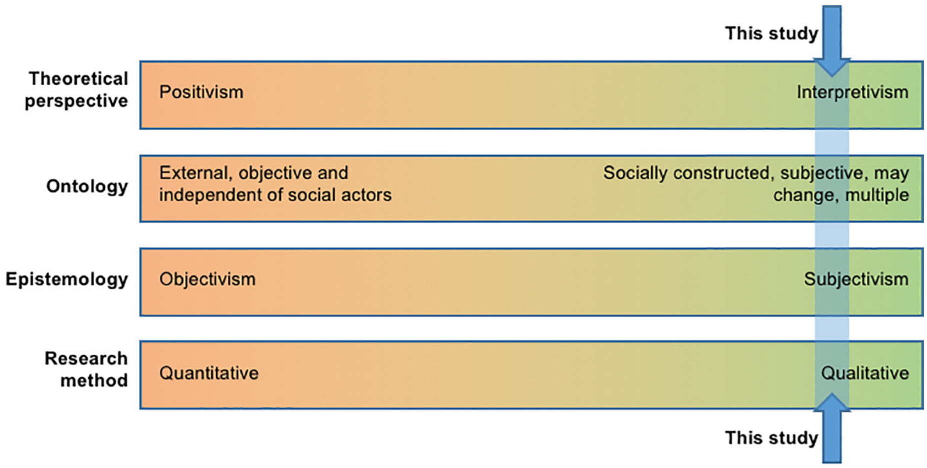

Fig. 1. Characteristics/methods associated with dominant research paradigms. Adapted from: (Gray, 2014; Wahyuni, 2012)

3.2.1. Photo elicitation and semi-structured interviews

This study's research method can be classified as quasi-ethnographic coupled with semi-structured in-person interviews. Specifically, the method used requires the research participants to take photographs of their day-to-day experience (for examples refer to Fig. 2) and then use these photographs as the stimuli for the semi-structured interviews (Clark-IbáÑez, 2004; Flick, 2009). This research method enables the researcher to ensure that the interview discussion remained grounded in the participants' practice experience without the necessity to be physically present in the participant's workplace. As per an interpretivist approach, it is accepted that this method is subject to the interpretation of the participant and the researcher (Smith, 2008). We note that semi-structured interviews are a common research method in project management research (for examples refer: Fernandes et al. (2015), Hodgson and Paton (2016) and Muller et al., 2013)).

However, the prior use of this specific quasi-ethnographic method has not been identified in the project management literature. In contrast, the method has been used in the social sciences more broadly (for example Castleden et al. (2008) and Einarsdottir (2005)) and its potential in organisational studies has been argued by several scholars (Bell and Davison, 2013; Meyer et al., 2013; Ray and Smith, 2012; Warren, 2005). These scholars discuss the paucity of studies using this method despite the benefits it would provide (Bell and Davison, 2013; Meyer et al., 2013; Ray and Smith, 2012). Warren (2005) argues for the benefits of using photo elicitation methods in organisational studies including that it can bring a greater primacy to the research participant's perspective of their world than textual narrative alone. Of relevance due to the links to the practice-turn grounding of this study, is Ray and Smith's (2012) argument that the strategy-as-practice field could particularly benefit from the use of photographic methods due to the focus it brings to 'doing' in an organisation. Meyer et al. (2013) in their detailed discussion of incorporating visual tools in research design, label the use of photos to trigger conversations with research participants as a 'dialogical

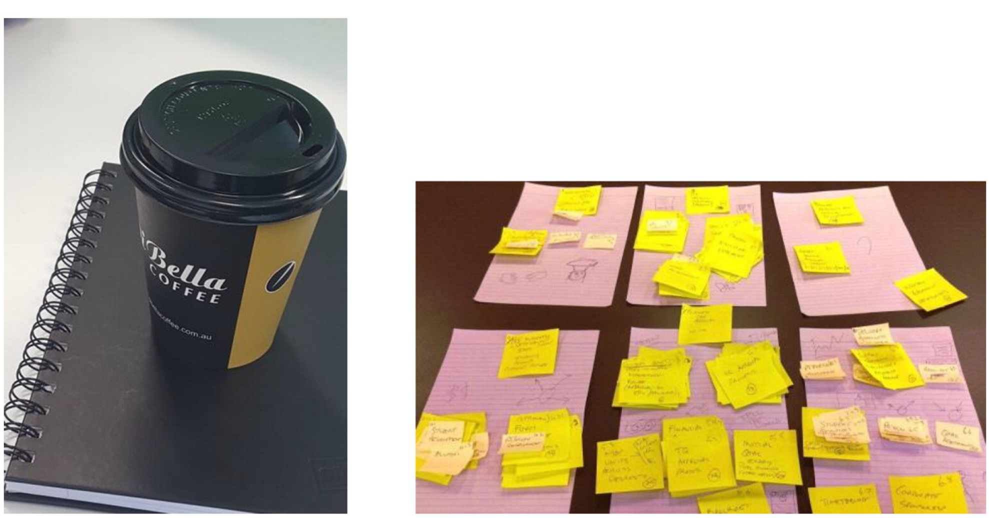

Fig. 2. Example photos taken by research study participants.

approach' to using visuals. They argue that the use of photos will elicit richer information for research participants.

A seminal empirical study by Collier (1957) provides efficacy for the research method. Collier (1957) was exploring the adaptation of migrants to their new communities. In Collier's (1957) research project two interviews were undertaken without using photos, and two interviews using photos as a trigger or guide for discussion were undertaken. More concrete information was gathered in the interviews using the photos (Collier, 1957). Collier (1957, p. 857) elaborates:

> "The material obtained with photographs was precise and at times even encyclopaedic; the control interviews were less structured, rambling, and freer in association… the analysis showed clearly that the pictures dictated the content of the interview, and more effectively than did the verbal prose."

Despite the relative scarcity of the methods use in organisational studies, there are some examples of its use in the discipline. Buchanan (2001) used photo-elicitation to complement other research methods in a business process re-engineering study in a hospital environment. The collection and use of the photos were found to provide a perspective not revealed in conventional interviews. Warren (2002) utilised photo elicitation as part of a broader ethnographic study in an IT firm. She argues that the technique enabled the research participants to better express experiences related to their physical surroundings. Warren (2002, p. 12) states:

> "The photographs make an interesting data set in their own right regarding the ways in which the respondents chose to define their work environment, what they felt to be worthy (and not worthy) of photographing, and the individual and sometimes innovative ways they framed their subjects."

Further examples include Rapport et al. (2006, 2007). They used this method in an investigation of general practitioners practice and their identity. The experience of 40 butchers at work was examined by Slutskaya et al. (2012) through the use of photo elicitation and in-depth interviews. They found that the photo elicitation method enabled more expressive and detailed accounts of the butchers' day-to-day experiences. Shortt and Warren (2012) also used respondent-led photography as a method to explore hairdressers' identity in the workplace.

3.2.2. Case study approach

The benefits of case study research are also present in this study. Specifically, each of the participants can be seen to be providing a window into a particular experience of project work — a case study. Case study research has been recognised as being valuable in project management research for the highly contextualised information and it can provide and for when an exploratory approach is required (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Reich, 2015). Again, such richness of descriptive data is strongly associated with practice-turn research (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009).

Eisenhardt (1989) discusses the value of case studies more broadly in terms of theory development. Tsoukas (1989) highlights the methodological alignment of case studies for idiographic studies. Idiographic studies being concerned with contextualised understanding rather than statistical generalisations, and this contextualised exploration is the aim of the researchers in this study. We particularly note Flyvbjerg's (2006) argument that large sample sizes are not required for a study to provide a scientific contribution. He states:

> "One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas 'the force of example' is underestimated (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 12)."

We highlight that statistical generalisability of findings is not being sought in this study. To recall the research question, this is a study on 'how' a particular aspect of project managing is undertaken. Yin (2009) specifically notes that a case study approach is particularly suitable for such questions. Darke et al. (1998) also note that statistical generalisation (reliant on large sample sizes) is not the goal of case study research as the cases are not sampling units, rather rich descriptions of a phenomenon are the goal. We also note that the suitability of case studies for project-as-practice research is evident in several studies introduced in Section 2. For example, Hällgren and Soderholm (2011) and Lalonde et al. (2012) used a single case study approach to gain a deeper understanding of what actually occurs in specific aspects of project work.

3.3. Research design

Recruitment for the study was based on the researcher's network. All project managers were currently working in Australia. Whilst not all participants held the title 'project manager', they self-selected 'project managing' as being a key feature of their role. Five men and one woman participated in the study. The participants' sectors of employment were: information systems, construction, education, finance and utilities. The participants' ages ranged from [20–29] to [40–49] years. Their experience in project work ranged from 8 years to 25 years, and their time in a project management role ranged from 6 years to 17 years (half of the participants had been in project management roles for over 10 years).

Initially, each participant was provided with high-level introductory information on the study purpose and the required commitment. Given their initial interest further information including the relevant ethics information was provided, and all participants provided consent to participate in the study. Each participant was asked to take between seven and ten photos (over the period of approximately one week) that captured their experience of managing project work. They were asked to capture photos that disclosed:

- What is it like to be a project manager?
- What are some of the key experiences of being a project manager?

- What do you find you are dealing with on a day-to-day basis when fulfilling the activity of project managing?

The participants, for privacy reasons, were encouraged not to take photos including other people, unless consent had been expressly given. Participants were also asked to make notes about why they had taken each photo. However, this was not done by all participants.

Each participant provided a digital copy of their photos to the researcher. The researcher printed large copies of each photo and provided each photo with a unique identifier. During the interviews, these printed images were used to guide the discussion between the participant and the researcher.

All interviews were undertaken face-to-face and an audio recording made. The researcher also took notes. The interviews varied in duration between 30 min and 2 h. An interview proforma was used to guide the interview. The initial questions elicited demographic information and a high-level overview of the participant's project management career. Then, for each photo that the participant had taken, they were asked to answer questions such as:

- What was the photo of?
- What did the photo disclose about project managing/the experience of project managing?
- What skills or experience supported that experience or activity? (optional depending on the photo and the explanation)

Once each photo they had taken had been discussed, the interview was concluded by asking some summative questions that prompted the participant to consider the images they had taken holistically.

3.4. Data analysis

For this research study, a form of thematic analysis (Ayres, 2008) was used for exploring the data (the transcribed interviews and photographs). Specifically, the data was being considered through the lens of 'alignment seeking'. Alignment seeking, as introduced in Section 2.4, was defined as the work of "trying to achieve agreement — between different views of "what was so" and "what was needed to do about it" (O'Leary and Williams, 2013, p. 574)". O'Leary and Williams (2013) argue that such alignment seeking is a precursor to achieving project delivery. During the data analysis process, the researcher was focused on identifying descriptions that indicated *how* alignment seeking was undertaken by the participant. Using the terminology introduced in Section 2.2, the researchers were looking for the *praxis* related to alignment seeking. That is, specific activities undertaken by a person in a specific situation (related to alignment seeking).

NVivo was utilised to support the data analysis. Additionally, given the interpretivist nature of the study and the aim to contribute to the project-as-practice literature, the researchers have focused on sharing actual data from the study in the findings (via quotations) rather than distilling the data to quantifiable values. This is recognised as a key feature of the thematic analysis approach (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and is aligned with case studies (Darke et al., 1998) and the importance of context in the practice-turn approach (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009).

4. Research findings

Before addressing the research question directly, we highlight that the research participants recognised that alignment seeking was a critical component in their role. Broad statements such as the following were evidence of this:

> "So, actually putting forward a case to build [the integration] to connect the two systems, so that's been an almost impossible task… this is a conversation I've been having for about a year trying to get people across the line…"
>
> [P1]

> "I would say you're almost a diplomat. You can end up in some pretty, pretty emotional situations, you need to be able to see the angels from each person's side, [and I have to explain to my clients], [u]nless a person is insane, they have a rational reason for doing what they're doing."
>
> [P2]

> "…quite often I find myself in a mediation role, more than in an advocacy role."
>
> [P6]

> "…you can't always make the best decision because you have to make a compromise. And compromise may not deliver the most optimal outcomes but it takes into account the needs of all the stakeholders."
>
> [P5]

Drawing directly on O'Leary and Williams' (2013) characteristics of alignment seeking, the project managers spoke directly to the recognition of the differing positions (taking positions) that was inherent in their projects, and also the need to resolve conflicts in these positions (achieving closure). With respect to the practice-turn terminology, these could be considered the macro (or environmental factors) which then require a certain praxis (or response).

For example, the participants reflected on the different views and the 'taking positions' that are present in their work. There was a need to make visible the varying perspectives at play:

> [in terms of managing contractual disputes] "… I'll do a report that argues both sides, so I'll say to the client 'this is their position, this is why they're taking it, this is the outcome of that position'. 'Here's my position, this is why I'm taking it, this is why I'm recommending our position.'"
>
> [P2]

> "Ask five different people [a question], different management levels, and they'll give you five different answers."
>
> [P3]

[in terms of project objectives and tasks] "…people make all sorts of interpretations."

[P5]

The participants also recognised the need to resolve these differing views (to achieve closure):

"…so to bring a project together is really half the battle – the challenge – but the bigger half battle is negotiating internal politics and a range of different stakeholders…"

[P3]

"… I had to keep everyone on the same path, together to get to the end. It was one [the photograph] to remind me, I was just trying to get all the people on the same line, so I thought if I did a picture of that, it would end up being [this]…"

[P4]

"…you need to be able to get them onboard."

[P4]

These descriptors of the participants' "lived experiences" brings attention to a project manager's role in understanding differing perspectives, and the need to mediate or reconcile these to bring an alignment in understanding or agreement on a forward path. It also highlights the environmental (macro) context in which project managers are required to work.

Of great interest to this paper, is *how* project managers actually achieve alignment seeking, in terms of their praxis. For ease of discussion, these have been grouped into two categories:

- That praxis that supports: building rapport and trust and demonstrating empathy
- That praxis that supports: seeding (selling)

We note that the project managers' praxis is integrated in practice i.e. the ability to seed concepts and bring alignment is enabled through the development of good interpersonal relationships.

4.1. The praxis of building rapport and trust and demonstrating empathy

A consistent theme discussed by the participants was the criticality of building rapport. Whilst they did not use the specific term 'alignment seeking' when discussing its importance, the praxis described in this section had the purpose of building rapport and trust and encouraging their teams and stakeholders to speak honestly and openly. The participants saw this as being important in identifying problems, or deviations from plans and therefore in being able to keep people "on track" (alignment seeking).

The praxis employed by the project managers to cultivate this rapport, trust and to demonstrate empathy varied. For example, two participants spoke directly to the importance of socialising associated with food. P4 consciously made time to participate in walking down "for coffee" each day. P4 commented "I'll make sure I talk to anyone I see on the way. And just socialise. Because, it's one of my things, that I can get very focused on delivery, I have to be conscious about people's feelings…". Similarly, another participant commented on creating opportunities to go to lunch with stakeholders or offering to pick-up lunch for a colleague. This participant [P5] commented that "It's those social conversations that are an integral part [of getting things done]. It's not all about work, work, work, you need to invest [in the relationship]." This finding aligns with the extant argument that having coffee with someone is a social tool. For example, Topik (2009) states that: "[l]et's have a cup of coffee" has come to mean "[l]et's have a conversation".

Associated with this concept, the participants spoke about building their relationships through asking non-work related questions and therefore developing a more social or personal understanding of their stakeholders or team. Knowing what their team or stakeholders were passionate about. For example, P1 discussed a particular type of meeting that was convened where team members could "check-in" on how things were going for them (not just in work terms), but things that might be affecting them as people. P3 discussed walking around the office and just asking people:

"…how they are going? Talk to them about something maybe related, maybe not related to the project. To establish and consolidate reasonably informal relationships with some stakeholders. With as many stakeholders as possible. And through those conversations, those relationships, those open relationships I pick up a lot of information…"

P5 raised this in terms of knowing the sports teams that your team or stakeholders support and being able to connect through this knowledge.

Another praxis used by P5, was the team kick-off meeting. P5 specifically commented that even in teams that were virtual — there was significant value in holding an in-person kick-off meeting to enable the team to meet one another, understand their interests and build rapport.

"Sometimes in those forums [kick-off meetings] too, there's a social aspect if you're going out as a team after that first project meeting, I try and find out about the people themselves. So they might have similar interests, they might have children the same age, those types of things. So breaking down those barriers, I've found is a very successful recipe for gelling the project team together early and everybody knowing about one another."

The use of technology was also seen as a key way of building rapport and better relationships. Video phones were discussed by P5 as being an enabler to better understanding a team member's or stakeholder's level of engagement or understanding.

Whilst such technology is seen as helpful, half of the participants commented on the value of site visits in terms of building relationships. P2 regularly takes monthly visits to the site to keep a pulse on their project and to resolve issues. P5 discussed the value of visiting remote teams or stakeholders: "...so I travel to them. Because you can really break down barriers by being with them and gain a lot of credibility that you can't get remotely". P5 continued:

> "...if I put the effort in, by going and spending time with them, they appreciate that and you really get 'cut-through' with them because you're going out of your way to spend time with them. And you're also not seen as, big brother, [you're seen] that you're there to genuinely help."

Humour was also recognised by some participants as part of their praxis to building rapport and relationships. P1 reflected that at the start of a board meeting they might make a joke to lighten the mood and connect with the board members less formally. P5 stated:

> "... so you break down some social barriers by saying 'I see broncos went well over the weekend', or if they didn't go well, you can have a bit of a laugh. And say 'my team beat your team' or whatever."

Several of the participants also spoke of understanding the personal drivers of their team members and stakeholders as assisting to build empathy and relationships. P1 drew on their background in the education sector stating:

> "if you want someone to buy into something it has to be personally meaningful for them. To make it relevant, realistic, concrete, so they can relate to it. So how to pitch a message to an audience that is going to be meaningful and relate to them."

P2 spoke directly of this need to understand differences in stakeholders' perspectives:

> "I would say to [the client]... 'Unless a person is insane, they have a rational reason for doing what they're doing. Because you can't see that, you think he's being irrational. But here's some of the things, he's probably thinking... Let's not worry about the action, let's address why he's feeling that'. Yeah, so there's that diplomacy and not believing there's only one way to get to a goal. And so to do that, you've got negotiation skills, you've got to be able to *empathise* with the client, you've got to be able to *empathise* with the people who are threatening to kill you..." (Italics added)

4.2. The praxis of seeding (selling)

Another aspect of the project managers' praxis to bring alignment to stakeholder and team behaviour was seeding and cultivating. In more common parlance we might use the term 'selling'. However, the participants reported a more subtle process than selling may conventionally suggest. It is associated with storytelling and appealing to others' sense of a higher good.

Firstly, several of the participants discussed the necessity to 'seed and cultivate' with the purpose of getting people on board or encouraging a particular course of action. Participant One spoke about this process in depth, highlighting how they plan the cultivation process to develop buy-in, gradually giving visibility to an idea. They highlight that this activity occurs over a period of time:

> "Yeah, well, everything starts with a seed. So, I guess first thing is, if I'm going to bother going down that track, I want to be really sure why I'm doing it and how it fits in strategically. So I'll have a plan of attack, and then working my way backwards, and finding where are the roadblocks, where are the problems, I'll be able to identify who I need to target with what message. And so then it could be an email or a conversation, or a brief or something to just get them thinking or at least some visibility of that idea. So then just by planting that seed, maybe things will resolve themselves spontaneously, maybe over time it will come back to you and it can be their idea. Or that it spawns a conversation elsewhere. But then once you've planted the seed, that's fine, just leave it for a while, a week, maybe a bit more, depending on how long the timeframes you're working to. But that means the next communication that goes out, they have some understanding, they've got some background, it's going to mean more, and depending on how important it is, keep providing that communication, repeatedly, in different ways, maybe it's re-forwarding an email, keep persevering, until you get the result you're after."
>
> [P1]

P1 spoke of the importance of selling concepts in a way that increased the likelihood of stakeholder or team buy-in (avoiding the project being "derailed"). It is necessary to propose ideas in a way that is attractive to a team member or stakeholder. They also mentioned the value in skirting around a topic if it was likely to work against alignment seeking. This might be particularly necessary in a board meeting, where a stakeholder may become fixated on a particular issue and therefore affect the ability to progress other items. The project manager deliberately brings focus to certain issues whilst avoiding (or minimising time spent) discussing other items.

P2 also reflected on how formal reports are a way of planting an idea with project stakeholders. This is a way of managing expectations and keeping the stakeholders onside through maintaining trust.

> "Because we're planting the ideas that this isn't necessarily going to go where you think it is. I don't say 'it's absolutely going to go here', because I don't know. But you know, you're looking at options the whole time, so, one point you're saying "we're coming up to this juncture", and you know I've written dozens of reports for this client now, saying "we're coming up to this juncture, when we hit this, the builder might do X — here's a strategy for that, or they might do y, and if they do y, here's a strategy for that, however there's also an a over to the side there that could

completely come out of left field that I'm not prepared for, but it is a risk that I'm telling you about now.'"

[P2]

The idea of seeding a concept, but with the aim of another person actually "discovering" the idea as their own was seen as important praxis by P4. The participant also spoke about pre-briefing or discussing a concept or an issue with people informally before formal discussions to increase the likelihood of achieving the desired outcome.

"... so you have to actually go and speak to them about the change, and some people you have to get them to come up with the idea. So some people want to be part of formulating the idea even though it's generally what you want them to do."

[P4]

The participant spoke of sending emails and making phone calls and even face-to-face meetings in advance of key decisions or meetings to achieve the desired outcome.

Some participants used the term storytelling when discussing managing their team and stakeholders. P1 described their storytelling praxis as follows: "And it's not always formalised, often it's in your head. Yeah, it's a very creative thing, isn't it? Creative problem solving and being flexible in your own thinking and bringing people along the journey." P4 reflected that storytelling was a skill they had developed during their career:

"So I used to, when I was 23, I'd go 'we're going to do this' and everyone would just go [blank expression on face], so I know, I have to take them on the journey of saying 'we're going to deliver this', you've got to use more to *sell* them how we're going to get it, when we have changes you have to *sell* why they need to change and why they need to improve, and how will it benefit them. Why should I spend the extra $20,000 or $2m is it actually going to improve them, why should we be doing this, and you need to be able to get them onboard." (Italics added)

Related to storytelling to create a vision and alignment was the difficulty in communicating this story or vision when the project outcome is not tangible (like a construction project).

"Well, the biggest challenge I have, and the thing that I notice is when you don't have something like this [pointing to a construction site in a photograph] to show people, they have a lot of varied views of what it is that you produce. And as well as that, it's hard to motivate people to deliver those things that are most important. You know, so we might have a clear view from our project, about what deliverables are, and define them, but it's hard, as a project manager to maintain that focus, but I'm sure most [inaudible] project managers can. I think it's harder still to explain to the people involved in a project what it is they're producing, and what things look like."

[P6]

P6 also talked about appealing to the higher good as part of getting stakeholders on board. Working in the education sector, they spoke of linking project objectives to students' lives being improved.

Specific praxis referenced by P1 was to have an 'elevator pitch' about the project and its current status. They also encouraged their team members to have a pitch in case of encountering a project stakeholder in a lift or a similar impromptu situation. When asked about the purpose of the elevator pitch they commented:

"...*marketing* is a great way to describe it. And it's actually one of the things that's (sic) listed on here [pointing to a list of project managing tools in a photograph], one of the tools, is *marketing*. So many ways of doing that, and I've taught the team to have a one-minute elevator speech, if you get stuck in the elevator with the CEO or CIO and they ask you how you're going, what are you going to say to them about the project to *promote* it?" (Italics added)

P4 spoke of their praxis in 'working' informal social structures or networks to sell an idea; a reluctance to rely on formal meetings to achieve agreement.

"So generally there's key people in your meetings who will sway others. Some, they're there, they might grumble, but back to psychology, you have to work out who your [key influencers are], and it's not necessarily your project sponsor, it can be someone totally different. There's a working of the network there."

P4 elaborated further:

P4: "So, knowing the key people to talk to, I've already spoken to them beforehand, I would not go in and ask for a change unless I'd spoken to those key people.

Interviewer: "How do you do that?"

P4: "In person, if you can, if not, over the phone. If not, if they're really busy people, it's via email, and putting out the different options to them and a recommendation... and that's the sales thing again, you say 'this is three options that we could, obviously there's always do nothing, do something, so something else, the benefits or pros and cons of each one. And then my recommendation'."

Informal meetings and discussions were also seen as praxis to bring alignment across stakeholders and the project team. For example, Participant One recounted a recent experience when they had unexpectedly encountered the Chief Executive Officer and had used this as an opportunity to seed information relating to the project and prepare them for upcoming news (to avoid a surprise). P4 discussed how their informal 'check-ins' at the beginning of each week were a time to confirm team members were 'on track': "So often on Monday, I'll do a check in with all of them, saying 'this is what we're going to do for the week'.

Do you agree? Have you got any issues?" Again, pre-briefing board members before the meeting was seen as important praxis for generating alignment and agreement. P1 commented:

> "...so really getting the stakeholders well across the issues before the board meeting, having the ability to have that two-way conversation in a fairly private situation, having time to respond to their concerns and provide any clarification, so when the board meeting came around it just ran like clockwork."

In Table 1 the praxis of the research participants described in these findings has been categorised into groups of practices. For each group of practices, an example of the research participants' praxis for this practice is provided. Direct quotations relevant to each group of practice and praxis is also provided.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study clearly contribute to the project-as-practice literature in providing rich descriptions of how project managers bring about alignment in their projects. The study has also confirmed the centrality of alignment seeking in project managing as proposed by O'Leary and Williams (2013). The implications for theory and practice are discussed below and summarised in Table 2.

5.1. Implications for theory

5.1.1. Validation of the existing literature

The study confirms the conceptual proposition by van der Hoorn and Whitty (2016a) that there is more to project managing than notions such as planning and control and their associated technical tools (e.g. Gantt charts and work breakdown structures). In fact, it is proposed that the praxis being disclosed in this study is actually the central 'tools' to delivering a project's outcomes. The other more technical 'tools' are commonly overhead. They may serve a purpose in terms of appearing professional (refer Whitty (2010)) or in setting an agenda and monitoring progress according to a plan. A project manager can set an agenda and monitor progress against these plans. But it is the alignment seeking and the praxis that is central to driving the progress — actually achieving the plan (in a sustainable way).

Such a proposition is congruent with the literature cited in Section 2. The findings of O'Leary and Williams (2013) are specifically validated and expanded upon. The underlying theoretical construct (social trajectories) of their study is also again found to be useful in disclosing the "lived experience" of project managing. The findings also align with discussions on the necessity of human skills (a key aspect of their praxis) for project managers (for example: Pinto (2000), Zielinski (2005) and Gillard (2009)) and therefore their need for inclusion in project management education (for example: Pant and Baroudi (2008)). More broadly, and with direct reference to the research question, this study has provided a contribution to the project-as-practice literature in providing concrete examples of how project managers undertake their work 'in practice'.

5.1.2. Disclosing the 'dirty' truth

As suggested by Buchanan and Badham (1999) some of the behaviours disclosed in this study could be seen as objectionable or unprofessional. For example, seeking personal relationships and showing empathy 'for the benefit' of delivering the project, or seeding with the 'hope' of influencing the outcome or bringing stakeholders to an agreement. However, in the context of the inherent challenges which project managers face; including lack of delivery capability (van der Hoorn and Whitty, 2016b); time pressure (Kerzner, 2013; Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006); and frequently lack of formal power (Kerzner, 2013; Thamhain and Gemmill, 1974) it is not surprising that such praxis is necessary.

In this context, and as recognised by the Rethinking Project Management network (Winter et al., 2006) and the project-as-practice agenda (for example: Cicmil et al. (2006) and Blomquist et al. (2010)), we do not advance the discipline and its practice by theorising about an idealised or espoused world (refer Argyris and Schon (1974)). If such praxis is central to delivering projects, we need to recognise this and discuss this with openness and honesty. Using a critical lens, Linstead et al. (2014) provide a discussion of the literature that has considered the less 'desirable' aspects of organisational life. They highlight the complex and ambiguous nature of this area of research and that some activities can shift from not necessarily being negative to pernicious in different contexts. Linstead et al. (2014) argue for the importance of research that disclose these facets of organisational life but that it is not without its challenges in terms of data collection. Despite the challenges of disclosing this 'dark side' of project managing, we agree with the importance of this line of research and the necessity of disclosing the practices that are actually in use by project managers.

5.1.3. Photo elicitation research methods

This study has also contributed to the literature by demonstrating the usefulness of a new research method for the discipline. Gaining ethnographic access to a site can be challenging. However, this photographic elicitation research method bridges some of these difficulties. It does not require the researcher to have permission to be on site, yet creates a window into the participants' environment and is a concrete grounding in their experience. In asking the participants to take photographs of their experience they are forced to speak to things from their "lived experience" during the interview. It is a strongly practitioner-grounded method, where the practitioner is bringing to the fore what they consider to be important in their experience of dealing with and managing project work.

The importance of including practitioners in project management research has been discussed within the literature (Bredillet, 2013; Walker et al., 2008) and is inherent in practice-turn research (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). This photo elicitation research method has a relatively low impact in terms of time or effort for the project manager participant,

Table 1
Tools and praxis for alignment seeking.

Practice (or 'tools')	Description	Purpose	Example of praxis from study participants [the 'how']	Example quote
The 'visualiser'	Builds a conceptual vision of the future. This can be used with the storybook.	To provide the core content of the storybook.	• Requirements: elicitation workshops • Consultation with executives	"So what it requires is a reasonably clear and disciplined agnostic explanation of what the project seeks to achieve, or the stage seeks to achieve, and then there's this multidisciplinary group assembled that need to then I guess visualize the future and identify the work that needs to be done from their functional areas to achieve the end state for the project." [P3]
The 'storybook'	Creates and shares a narrative to communicate and justify what the future is going to be.	To bring team members or stakeholders into alignment (and stay in alignment in a committed and cooperative way).	• Elevator pitch • "Key messages" or vignettes that are used repeatedly in meetings or conversations	"…so I know, I have to take them on the journey of saying 'we're going to deliver this', you've got to use more to *sell* them how we're going to get it, when we have changes you have to *sell* why they need to change and why they need to improve, and how will it benefit them. Why should I spend the extra $20,000 or $2m is it actually going to improve them, why should we be doing this, and you need to be able to get them onboard." [P4]
The 'seeder' (can be used to increase impact of 'the storybook')	Unfolds suggestions in a subtle way. Includes the use of informal and formal networks (particularly influential people or network hubs) to gradually build an idea or raise the need for change.	To manage expectations and to enable ownership of changes or actions by others. Increases the willingness of stakeholders and team members to accept ideas or actions.	• Reporting a risk in a risk register that might eventuate sometime in the future • Sending an email with a problem, then mentioning the problem again when passing a person at coffee, then raising it formally in a monthly report	"Yeah, well, everything starts with a seed. So, I guess first thing is, if I′m going to bother going down that track, I want to be really sure why I′m doing it and how it fits in strategically. So I′ll have a plan of attack, and then working my way backwards, and finding where are the roadblocks, where are the problems, I′ll be able to identify who I need to target with what message." [P1]
The 'personal driver'	Understand the personal drivers (or motivations) of stakeholders and team members and leverage or appeal to these. This tool underpins a tailored approach to engaging a team member or stakeholder.	Increases the likelihood of a team member or stakeholder remaining 'in alignment' and cooperating.	• Finding out whether a team member is motivated by recognition, or financial reward or acceptance by peers, and then using this driver to encourage them to take a particular action (or do a task)	"So what I will do is go and speak to them and work out what their drivers are. So some people will only do things for you if their boss wants them to, so then you have to go and work with their boss. Some people are just if you're really happy around them, they'll be more willing to do stuff for you." [P4]
The 'greater good' (can be used to increase impact of 'the storybook')	Describes ideas or actions in terms of a higher good or greater purpose.	Increases the likelihood of a team member or stakeholder remaining 'in alignment' and cooperating.	• Relate the vision and storybook to personal drivers such as 'improving people's lives' or 'keeping people healthy'	"I guess for me I develop a body of useful things that I′ve learnt, about education and how it can be good for society, and so in my everyday interactions that they just roll off the tongue. It's those sorts of things, yeah. And some people that I′d be convincing would be regions, regional leaders, business leaders, teachers, about the value of this space." [P6]
The 'Jedi Mind Trick' (can be used in association with 'the seeding machine')	Guides a team member or stakeholder to come to an idea or make a decision of their own accord.	Increases the willingness to accept ideas or actions.	• In a meeting, laying 'breadcrumbs' to an nevitable idea or solution, but no actually disclosing that idea or solution… just laying the trail or 'crumbs' to it	"…so you have to actually go and speak to them about the change, and some people you have to get them to come up with the idea. So some people want to be part of formulating the idea even though it's generally what you want them to do." [P4]
The 'hobbies and interests'	Inquiry into the more personal aspects of team members' and stakeholders' lives (such as family members and sporting teams).	To assist in building rapport and trust. Provides information to enable personal history and drivers to be accessed and empathy demonstrated.	• Asking team members what their hobbies are • Remembering and acknowledging team members' birthdays • Following up on activities undertaken by team members on the weekend	When walking around the office just asking: "people how they are going? Talk to them about something maybe related, maybe not related to the project. To establish and consolidate reasonably informal relationships with some stakeholders. With as many stakeholders as possible. And through those conversations, those

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Practice (or 'tools')	Description	Purpose	Example of praxis from study participants [the 'how']	Example quote
				relationships, those open relationships I pick up a lot of information…" [P3]
The 'face-to-face'	Communication modes that enable body language and facial expression to be seen and responded to. Allows the project manager to use their body language and facial expressions to communicate (particularly, "trust me!").	To assist in building rapport and trust. Also enables detection of incongruence (bullshit).	• Web-chats • Site visits • Travelling to visit staff at remote locations	"…so I travel to them. Because you can really break down barriers by being with them and gain a lot of credibility that you can't get remotely." [P5]
The 'café'	Use of social rituals (such as going for coffee or sharing a meal).	To assist in building rapport and trust. (Leverages off associations between food, coffee etc. and friendliness)	• Taking a team member to a coffee shop to discuss an issue • Taking a new project team to lunch following a kick-off meeting • Sharing a celebratory afternoon tea	"It's those social conversations that are an integral part [of getting things done]. It's not all about work, work, work, you need to invest [in the relationship]." [P5]
The 'ice breaker'	Use of humour informal situations to decrease anxiety and pressure and to create an atmosphere of friendliness.	Encourages team members or stakeholders to be more open and willing to engage	• Telling a joke at the beginning of a board meeting • Making fun of a common cumbersome process or issue	"… so you break down some social barriers by saying 'I see broncos went well over the weekend', or if they didn't go well, you can have a bit of a

whilst still empowering them to tell their story in a meaningful way. Whilst there is obviously an interpretation of the photographs and subsequent transcripts by the researcher, the selection of the primary data (what will be discussed in their interview) is undertaken by the practitioner based on their choice of photographs.

We also note the calls to 'complexify rather than simplify' in theory development (Tsoukas, 2017). Tsoukas (2017) highlights that the gap between theory and practice is no surprise given that in 'simplified' theorising we remove what matters. He continues that we need more complex and integrated (conjunctive) theories to enable us to capture the inherent complexity of organisational life. Methods such as those adopted in this study enable the concrete experience of each research participant to be captured in a manner that moves us closer to ensuring that what matters most is included in our theorising about project work. Such rich description contributions better prepare us for developing conjunctive theories that reflect project work actuality.

5.2. Implications for practice

With respect to practice, it is hoped that the findings of this study bring a validation to the relationship and trust building aspects of project managing that are central to sustainable project delivery. We would argue that if the 'real' praxis of project managing (such as those required for alignment seeking) are understood, there could be less focus on the technical activities which are not actually adding value. This study has revealed very practical 'tools' such as starting a meeting with a joke, and considering the framing of propositions to generate the greatest buy-in that would be invaluable to the inexperienced practitioner. We are not proposing that practitioners cannot use the traditional technical tools if they are useful in a context. However, in validating the potential array of practices that can enable project delivery, the practitioner is enabled to make an authentic choice (van der Hoorn and Whitty, 2015c) about what is most needed in a given project and where their effort is best expended.

Such recognition will require a cultural and social shift where subtle human skills are valued to at least the same extent as 'body of knowledge' competencies. Clearly, there are numerous conditions working against such a shift. Training and certifying in the practices disclosed by this study would be challenging, subjective and context-dependent. As such, the professional associations are unlikely to shift their focus from the more easily trainable and assessable technical tools. Furthermore, for organisations to truly trust the authentic choices of their project managers, and when not required or

Table 2
Summary of study implications.

Theoretical implications	• Further validation that project managing requires praxis beyond the tools and processes provided in the dominant bodies of knowledge. • Further validation of the centrality of 'alignment seeking' and human skills in project managing. • Reinforcement of the need and benefit for critical and actuality-based research agendas for project work. • Demonstration of the value in quasi-ethnographic and practitioner as co-researcher approaches in project research. These methods have strong value in providing rich descriptions of the project experience that can support the development of integrated (conjunctive) theories.
Practice implications	• Brings visibility and legitimacy to the importance of project managing praxis (e.g. coffee meetings) that is not generally discussed in the literature or in the bodies of knowledge. • Highlights the limitations of current competency models in their omission of these less recognised praxes.

unsuitable to not employ 'body of knowledge' or methodology dictates, there needs to be a culture of trust rather than of fear and blame avoidance.

In disclosing and discussing this more subtle praxis, it is hoped that practitioners are able to discuss and claim value in the 'tools' that are actually central to their practice. In recognising these as project managing praxis, such tacit skills and knowledge can be incorporated into informal training such as mentoring and communities of practice. Rather than associating some of these devices with being 'dirty' or objectionable, they need to be understood for what they are: praxis to assist with the "lived experience" of project delivery. For a coffee meeting that results in a recalcitrant stakeholder agreeing to undertake a required activity is surely no less important than updating a risk register. In fact, to continue the example, surely it is such praxis that actually mitigates the risk.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

The primary limitation of this study is the lack of geographic, gender and nationality diversity across the participants. Future research can include the expansion of the sample size and would include increasing the demographic diversity of the participants. This is likely to result in the identification of further project managing praxis to support the achievement of alignment and other project management functions.

The request not to take photographs of other people without consent being expressly given can also be seen as a limitation. However, the study participants did take photographs which prompted them to discuss people-based interactions in their work.

Future research could also include further method triangulation by employing pure ethnographic approaches. This is recommended as it is likely, that project managers are not even aware of some of the praxis that they are employing that are central to their project managing (refer Adams (2011) regarding the competence learning cycle). Furthermore, studies could be undertaken to identify what praxis might be in play by others involved in (but not in the leadership of) projects, and how do these affect a project's trajectory?

6. Conclusion

This study has disclosed 'how' project managers 'seek alignment' across their project stakeholders. Specifically, the praxes of six project managers (in relation to alignment seeking) have been captured and these praxes have been grouped into a series of ten 'tools'. These 'tools' can be considered the common 'practices' that project managers can employ through varying praxis to seek alignment. Like any 'tool set' some practitioners will use all these tools, others may only use a selection of the tools. And further, how they use these tools (their praxis) will vary from practitioner to practitioner.

With respect to the research problem, this study has provided a contribution to the project-as-practice literature by capturing rich descriptive accounts of project managing in practice. We have placed the project manager as the focus of our inquiry and disclosed their 'doing'. If the project management discipline is to develop theories centred on practice, capturing such praxis is paramount. Such 'how to' knowledge is also critical in our training of practitioners who can operate in the messiness and conflict-prone world of project work. It is also paramount to building theories of project managing that are conjunctive and reflect the inherent complexity of organisational life.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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