

# IRNOP 2015: Paper Submission

## The Power of Projects

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### Paper Title

## **The project manager is condemned to be free: A continental model of angst in projects**

### Abstract

This paper develops a continental philosophical model for angst (anxiety) in projects in an attempt to understand its sources and connections to the project manager's recurring practice of decision-making. The model is grounded in the work of Heidegger and Sartre. It combines the concepts of temporal unity; the anxiety and despair that results from the freedom and responsibility to choose and the uncertainty of how others may act; and how perceived current choices are informed by past actions. The model highlights the sources of angst in projects, the criticality of soft skills for those involved in projects, and the affect of past experiences in the choices adopted by project managers and stakeholders.

### Keywords

Anxiety (angst) | Decision-making (choice) | Continental philosophy

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Bronte has worked in the private and public sector in project and change management roles and now works in a consulting capacity. In addition to her project experience, Bronte develops graphical representatives of qualitative concepts to increase the accessibility of important messages. She is currently a PhD Candidate focusing on the "lived experience" of projects through a continental philosophical lens.

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Jon enjoys looking at projects and their management through alternative lenses, such as evolutionary theory, complexity science and philosophy and enjoys ruminating on the new insights that emerge. He's published journal articles and book chapters on these topics and delights in the opportunity to talk about them. He's currently Senior Lecturer in Project Management at the University of Southern Queensland, and has a small but pioneering group of PhD students and industry focused research projects that are bringing new and interesting understandings to light.

## **1 Introduction**

This paper proposes a conceptual model of what can bring about anxiety in the project environment. The model is grounded in the continental philosophical perspectives of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Anxiety has been recognised as existing in the workplace generally, and specifically in project work. However, an extant conceptual model that proposes how anxiety arises in the project environment has not been identified. Subsequently, in developing this model, the literature regarding uncertainty and anxiety in projects is extended. Consideration is also given to how the model may increase understanding of the ‘lived experience’ of projects.

The paper commences by outlining the need for this conceptual model. A review of literature relating to anxiety in the workplace and in projects is then provided. The defining of the research question and introduction of the philosophical concepts that ground the model then follows. A theoretical exploration outlines key principles of the model and a descriptive summary and diagrammatic representation of the model are provided. The implications of the model in terms of the ‘lived experience’ of projects, the extant literature and future research are also discussed.

### **1.1 Defining key terms**

It is necessary to briefly provide definitions of key terms used in this paper. Anxiety (in general/psychological discourse) is commonly defined as an unpleasant emotional state (Arkin & Rucks 2007). It is associated with feelings of worry, nervousness, apprehension, fear and uneasiness (Cole 2010). In anxiety, the emotional state is a response to a non-specific threat (Arkin & Rucks 2007). These definitions reflect the psychological or general

understanding of these concepts and underpin the literature review. However, anxiety when discussed with reference to continental philosophical concepts has a specific meaning. For Sartre, anxiety is a sense of anguish associated with the freedom we have to choose; the angst in having choice (Sartre 1994). This conception of anxiety will underpin the theoretical exploration and discussion and will be further explained in section 6.

## **2 Research Problem**

There is some foundational exploration in the extant literature regarding the ‘lived experience’ emotional aspects of projects. Such exploration indicates that stress, anxiety, tensions, and ‘ups and downs’ are associated with projects (van der Hoorn in press; Whitty 2010). However, we do not actually understand the source of these emotions at an ontological level. There is discussion of more superficial reasons for anxiety in projects in the literature, however we would argue that there is an opportunity to explore the more fundamental basis for these emotions in project management through a continental philosophical lens.

## **3 Literature Review**

The literature review begins with an overview of anxiety in the workplace in general and then on anxiety in project work.

### **3.1 Anxiety and Work**

Within the extant literature regarding workplace safety and psychology there are various references to anxiety. For the purposes of this review, we provide a sample of the literature across three categories: causes of anxiety in the workplace; effects of anxiety in the workplace and coping strategies; and workplace interventions for treating anxiety.

### *3.1.1 Causes of anxiety in the workplace*

The literature acknowledges generally that the workplace can be a cause of anxiety and also provides discussion of various specific factors that can result in anxiety. For example, Helge (2001) conceptually discuss the causes and affects of workplace anxiety and anger and proposes mitigation strategies to improve productivity. Linden and Muschalla (2007) also highlight that there is growing evidence that workplaces can contribute to the development of anxiety-associated problems or disorders. In their study they explore what is the relationship between work-related anxiety and anxiety in general.

In terms of specific sources of anxiety, workforce bullying is referenced as a significant trigger throughout the literature. For example, Quine (2001) in a study of workplace bullying in nurses, including its impact on occupational health outcomes, found that those who were subject to bullying would be significantly more likely to experience anxiety. A Norwegian study examined whether workplace bullying was the significant source of workplace anxiety often cited by the literature, and did find that it was a substantial contributor to anxiety (Hauge 2010). Brousse et al. (2008) undertook a study based on the strong linkages between bullying and mental health problems, including anxiety. They found that at the time of first clinical intervention 83% of the participants who had reported bullying also had anxiety disorders; 12 months after initial clinical intervention this had decreased to 60%. A study by Driscoll, Worthington and Hurrell (1995) of the psychological effects of workplace assault on a sample of public servants found that there was a correlation between anxiety and assault.

The changing workplace and organisational change has also been identified as a source of workplace anxiety. Wanberg and Banas (2000) in their longitudinal study of openness towards organisational change identify anxiety as a common emotion associated with workplace change, and subsequently propose a variety of mechanisms for encouraging acceptance of such change. Yeatts (2000) explored the adaptation of older workers' to a changing workplace and also identified anxiety as a result of changing workplace conditions. Brillhart (2004) discusses technology (technostress) as a source of anxiety and proposes a variety of mechanisms to manage the adverse affects of this technology stress in organisations today.

A more fringe perspective is presented by Brown (2000) who discusses the ontological insecurity, existential anxiety and self-doubt as a result of the increase in surveillance technologies in the workplace. He draws on the insights of Giddens (1991) who discusses the shame that can result from anxiety about the disclosure of the actual self as opposed to the "idealised" version that we want to be.

### *3.1.2 Effects of anxiety and coping*

There is some discussion in the literature regarding the effects of anxiety in the workplace. For example, Winstanley and Whittington (2002) take a sector specific view studying staff anxiety, coping styles, burnout, and immediate after-effects in relation to experiences of aggression in psychiatric institutions. Haslam et al. (2005) have also undertaken a study to identify the effect of anxiety and depression (and their treatments) on the sufferer and their workplace. In this study they explored the specific relationship between anxiety and depression conditions, medication, performance and safety in the workplace. They found that

the respondents (anxiety and depression sufferers) considered that their conditions did place them a risk with respect to workplace safety.

### *3.1.3 Management of anxiety in the workplace*

Finally, there have been various studies of the effectiveness of treatments focusing on anxiety reduction in the workplace. For example, Shulman and Jones (1996) specifically investigated the impact of massage therapy on anxiety in the workplace, finding it to be effective. Cooke et al. (2007) undertook a study on the affect of an aromatherapy massage accompanied by music intervention on nurses and found it did significantly reduce anxiety in the control participants. A study on the effects of a single music relaxation session on staff in a customer service setting by Smith (2008) found that the music relaxation intervention did significantly reduce the anxiety levels in participants. Of a more general nature, Martin, Sanderson and Cocker (2009) reviewed a series of studies trialing interventions to reduce workplace depression and anxiety symptoms. They found that there are a broad-range of interventions which can be effective but their affect is generally small. Muschalla and Linden (2009) undertook a study on workplace phobia, a specific anxiety disorder associated with thinking or approaching a workplace. It was identified that workplace phobia is different to more general anxiety conditions, with far-reaching consequences for work-participation and requiring its own treatment approaches.

This overview of the literature relating to workplace anxiety highlights that current discourse is primarily focused on cause, effect, and the treatment associated with anxiety in traditional psychological terms. Discussions of a more philosophical nature, with the notable exception of Brown (2000), have not been identified.

### **3.2 Anxiety and Project Management**

There is some discussion of anxiety in projects throughout the literature. We have grouped these discussions as ‘emotional intelligence and coping with anxiety in projects’; ‘risk management and anxiety in projects’; and ‘other sources of anxiety in projects’.

It is highlighted that Sauer and Reich (2009), Sec. 5.1 in their discussion which validates the direction of the Rethinking Project Management research agenda suggest adding the conceptualisation of “projects as an emotional process”. They highlight that Project Managers talk about their activities in emotional terms including anxiety and this is evident in the following literature.

#### *3.2.1 Emotional intelligence and coping with anxiety*

The emotional intelligence and soft skills aspects of project management are gaining increasing coverage in the literature. In their discussion of leadership and emotional intelligence in project management, Sunindijo, Hadikusumo and Ogunlana (2007), discuss the concept of self-management and that this requires an ability regulate factors such as anxiety. They indicate that Project Managers with higher emotional intelligence have increased positive outcomes for organisations. The criticality of ‘soft skills’ in software project management is also discussed by Sukhoo et al. (2005). They discuss the criticality of stress management and that stress which is not managed can lead to anxiety that can adversely affect both the individual and the organisation. Akgün et al. (2007) explore the correlation between management support, anxiety and product development project outcomes. They found that when there was team anxiety, there was a positive correlation between speed-to-market of new products when there was management support.

There have also been explorations of the varying experiences/responses to anxiety by different personality types, cultures and sector environments. In his discussion of the different personality types of software developers, Howard (2001, p. 24) comments on certain personality types (convergers) as having an ‘anxiety’ to “get solutions underway”; they move to solutions quickly. Adopting a cultural perspective, Hofstede (1983) explores the cultural dimensions of project management, he highlights that cultures frame uncertainty differently and therefore there can be a greater or lesser anxiety in relation to uncertainty based on cultural conditioning. Bredillet, Yatim and Ruiz (2010) build on this work, finding that project management is more widely deployed in countries where there are low uncertainty avoidance scores. Haynes and Love (2004) studied how construction project managers coped with work-related stress. Findings included that anxiety was inversely related to project financial value, that age was positively correlated with anxiety, active coping strategies were negatively related to anxiety, whilst avoidance coping was positively correlated with anxiety (Haynes & Love 2004).

Finally, Thiry (2001) draws on the concept of Cartesian anxiety to explore the sensemaking aspect of value management in projects. Thiry (2001) highlights the importance of creating a shared view and how when faced with a situation that does not seem logical, anxiety can be triggered which cues the person/s back to an existing paradigms (ways of thinking) to resolve the uncertainty that may not actually be helpful. This will become pertinent in our discussion.



### *3.2.2 Risk management and anxiety in projects*

There has also been some discussion regarding the relationship between project risks, their management, and anxiety. Kutsch and Hall (2009) undertook a study exploring the reasons for risk management not being implemented in project management. One of the reasons they identified was anxiety: specifically exposing risk can create anxiety and even cause cancellation of a project (which project managers – or others may want to avoid). They reiterate this notion (of avoiding anxiety) in a qualitative study of why IT project managers deem certain risks as irrelevant (Kutsch & Hall 2010). This aligns with their earlier findings via interviews that also found that project managers may not have disclosed risk due to the likely creation of anxiety (Kutsch & Hall 2005). In their exploration of the challenges of day-to-day project management, Wilemon and Cicero (1970) identify that a project manager's anxiety in relation to risk is correlated with their acceptance of responsibility for the project. Also that their anxiety associated with professional obsolescence is related to the amount of time that they fulfill project roles (Wilemon & Cicero 1970).

### *3.2.3 Other sources of anxiety in the project environment*

There is also extant literature regarding specific aspects of projects that have been associated with anxiety. Rowen (1990) discusses ambiguity (and incompleteness) in requirements in software projects and he uses the term 'anxiety' when discussing the situation of seeking user sign-off. The process of introducing a project management culture is explored by Firth and Krut (1991), they identify a list of sources of anxiety in organisations utilising project management. These sources include: managing workload, existing loyalties within the organisation that may not align with project needs, remuneration, and transitioning in and out of projects. In their case study of decision-making processes in a complex organisation,

Bourne and Walker (2005) highlight the significant anxiety that can be associated with the change implemented by a project.

In summary, it is evident that the discussion in the extant literature regarding anxiety in projects is primarily in relation to the exploration of emotional intelligence and soft skills, the link between risk management and anxiety, and identification of surface sources of stress in the project environment. With the exception of Thiry (2001) there is no philosophically-grounded discussion or conceptual models of anxiety in project management.

### **3.3 Conclusions from the literature review**

This review has highlighted that there is a variety of explorations regarding anxiety in work and projects. However, there is minimal exploration of anxiety using a philosophical lens.

The exceptions to this are the work by Thiry (2001) which does draw on the Cartesian concept of anxiety in a project context and the discussion regarding anxiety caused by a general increase in workplace surveillance by Brown (2000) which is grounding in the concept of existential anxiety. Consequently, it is valid to argue that there is an opportunity to add to this literature on anxiety in the project context drawing on a continental (rather than analytical) philosophical perspective.

## **4 Research Question**

Can we create a continental philosophical model for anxiety in the project environment? And if so, what are the implications for project managing, and how can this enhance our understanding of the 'lived experience' of projects?

## **5 Theoretical basis of the model**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This paper attempts to provide a theoretical model of anxiety in the project environment. The model (which is presented in graphical form in section 6.2.4) is developed by using key continental philosophy concepts (particularly those of Sartre and Heidegger), such as *authenticity, freedom, choice* and *angst* and considering the phenomena of managing projects through this continental lens. Subsequently, prior to exploring the model brief introductions to these continental concepts are provided. In this paper, continental philosophical terms are highlighted in italics.

Additionally, it is highlighted that in this paper that we are adopting the definition of a project proposed by van der Hoorn and Whitty (in press) which is based on a Heideggerian paradigm of projects. They propose that a project is the situation arising when there is need for restoration in an environment (*equipmental totality*), and there is a commitment to undertake this restoration but it is beyond the innate capability of the individual or organisation to remediate the problem (van der Hoorn & Whitty in press). Similarly, their distinction between project management and project managing is adopted; the former being the traditional methods (such as PMBOK and PRINCE2), the latter being the broader responses required to manage the restoration of the situation (van der Hoorn & Whitty in press).

### **5.2 Key Heideggerian Concepts**

van der Hoorn and Whitty (in press) have proposed a Heideggerian paradigm of projects and provide an overview of key concepts in Being and Time as they can be applied to projects. In this paper, we will briefly introduce key concepts in Being and Time (1962) that are

foundational to Sartre's philosophical concepts underpinning the proposed model. It is noted that Heidegger's Being and Time ontology is distinct from the more dominant Cartesian philosophies in its holistic approach and phenomenological grounding.

### 5.2.1 Care

Heidegger proposes that there are different *modes-of-being* (Blattner 2006; Wheeler 2013).

*Dasein* is the mode-of-being that Heidegger associates with human beings (Greaves 2010).

This assignment is based on *Dasein*'s (human beings) ability to 'give a damn' or take a stand on itself (Cerbone 2008; Kaelin 1988). *Dasein* therefore has the ability to *care* about people, things and situations (Dreyfus 1991). The physical building of a factory that is redundant because its technology can no longer produce the products required by the market does not *care*. Comparatively, *Dasein* working in the factory can choose to *care* about this situation and choose to remediate the situation through acquiring and installing new equipment (a project, if this is not something the organisation is familiar with undertaking).

### 5.2.2 Temporality

Heidegger proposes an alternative conception of time to the traditional linear Cartesian perspective. For Heidegger, *temporality* is a unified concept: with the notion of past, present and future being unified in *Dasein* (Blattner 2005). In phenomenological terms this means that what has happened in the past is infused in us now and will influence our future and what *choices* are available to us (Cerbone 2008; Wheeler 2013). We cannot conceive our experiences in time as isolated and discrete; they are continuous and infused. The concept of our past affecting us now and into the future is coined *thrownness* by Heidegger (Haugeland

2013). *Projecting* is Heidegger's concept for our direction towards future possibilities (Cerbone 2008). What *Dasein* cares about is manifest in *projection* (Dreyfus 1991).

### 5.2.3 Authenticity

Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962) includes the concept of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* that is fundamental to Sartre's notion of freedom and choice. According to Heidegger, *inauthenticity* is a particular state of *Dasein* where there is a conformance to the "done thing" or cultural norms and rules without consideration to the actual situation and what may be the best action for that scenario (Dreyfus 2000). An *authentic* approach requires *Dasein* to deal with *anxiety* associated with there being no definitive right or wrong, and to respond to the actual situation being encountered (Blattner 2006; Dreyfus 2000). In summary, *Dasein* have the *choice* to respond *authentically* to the actual scenario being encountered in a manner not necessarily aligned to the "done thing" or rules, or they can respond *inauthentically* and conform to norms that may not actually be what is required in the given scenario.

### 5.2.4 Anxiety & Fear

For Heidegger, *fear* describes a response to a specific threat; a threat on ourselves (Dreyfus 1991). We can have *fear* of a particular object, and if the source of that *fear* is addressed the *fear* dissipates. For Heidegger, this experience of *fear* is different to that of *anxiety*. *Anxiety* is foundational to the structure of *Dasein*. It is not worrying or fretting, rather it is through *anxiety* that it becomes evident that *Dasein* is a being that must take a stand on itself (Mulhall 2005). Generally, *Dasein* (as its *inauthentic-self*) falls into the ways of the norms and general-rules to mitigate the *anxiety* of the responsibility of taking a stand on itself (Wheeler 2013).

### 5.3 Key Sartre Concepts

Heidegger's *Being and Time* ontology pre-dates Sartre's work, and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1994) has been proposed as synthesising *Being and Time* and the work of Heidegger's teacher, Husserl (Linsenbard 2010). Existentialism is proposed as having its early foundations in the works of philosophers such as Keierkegaard and Nietzsche.

However it is Sartre (and his associates such as de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty and Camus) that are most strongly associated with its manifestation in European popular culture in the 1940s and 1950s (Crowell 2010). A complete description of Sartre's philosophy is beyond the scope of this paper, as such, we provide here an overview only of Sartre's concepts that underpin the model proposed in section 6.

#### 5.3.1 *Existence precedes essence (we shape ourselves)*

A primary principle of existentialism is that *existence precedes essence* (Sartre 2007). Sartre (2007) identifies that we are materialised (we physically show up in the world) without a preconceived notion of what we are. Each human being, through their actions (choices) shapes their *essence* (Sartre 2007). We highlight here alignment with Heidegger's differentiation of human beings to other 'things' in their ability to take-a-stand or act (to *care*). This concept of *existence* preceding *essence* is critical to this discussion as it is the foundation for the criticality of *freedom* and *choice*. Without this principle, we could assume that our *essence* is predetermined.

#### 5.3.2 *Freedom and choice*

Central to Sartre's philosophy is that given our *essence* is not predetermined; we have the *freedom* to choose, to determine our destiny and therefore our *essence*. Sartre (1994, p. 440)

states: “Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made-to-be at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to make itself instead of to be”. Sartre (2007) is clear that this *freedom* is not an opportunity for reckless capriciousness, rather he emphasises the (burdensome) responsibility associated with this *freedom*. That is, when we exercise our *freedom* through *choice* we are not only defining ourselves but signaling what is appropriate for broader humanity (Sartre 2007).

As an atheist, Sartre (2007) highlights the lack of any pre-existing values upon which to ground our *choices* and the feelings that this lack of grounding can invoke. There is no good or bad, no universal moral tenants on which we can base our *choices*. Everything is potentially permissible (Sartre 2007). Sartre (2007, p. 29) states:

“That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free:  
condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free,  
because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does...  
Neither do existentialists believe that man can find refuge in some given  
sign that will guide him on earth...”

Sartre (1994) also highlights that our *choices* ‘are’ our actions. He states that dreams, expectations and hopes do not count. Reality, which is the series of actions we take, is what determines our lives (Sartre 2007).

### 5.3.3 *Abandonment, anguish and despair*

The concepts of *abandonment* and subsequently *anguish* and *despair* are also discussed by (Sartre 2007). *Abandonment* is based in Sartre’s conception that there is no god and therefore no definitive values-base or signs to guide our actions as to what is good or bad, right or wrong. If we adopt an existentialist view, we are *abandoned* in that there is no definitive

anchor upon which we can base or legitimise our *choices*. *Anguish* is the result of this lack of a universal grounding when we exercise our *freedom* through self-selected action. This *anguish* is aligned with Heidegger's concept of ontological *anxiety* and we would argue is similar to the emotion of anxiety described in the extant literature. Sartre (2007) identifies the feelings that a military leader may have when sending troops into battle as being *anguish*. Whilst superiors may have provided the broader orders, the details of the battle are his responsibility, his decisions (*choice*) to be made. And these decisions will affect his soldiers and therefore he feels *anguish*.

Sartre (2007) associates *despair* with our inability to rely on others. They too are free to make *choices* and we cannot trust what their actions will be. There is an ambiguity in the unfolding of our future due to an inability to predict the actions of others and how they will impact on us. Sartre (2007) argues that this should not drive us to quiet inaction but rather simply highlight that beyond our own ability to choose and act, we cannot count on anything or anyone. He states:

“...Nor can I be certain that comrades-in-arms will carry on my work after my death and bring it to completion, seeing that those men are free and will freely choose, tomorrow, what man is to become (Sartre 2007, p. 36)”.

In sum, whilst *freedom* based on our *abandonment* results in *anguish*, it creates significant opportunity for us to cultivate our own *essence*. Yet we also feel *despair* because we cannot rely on the actions (*choices*) of others.



## **6 A continental philosophical model for angst in projects**

Having provided an outline of the key philosophical concepts that comprise the model, the proposed theoretical model of angst in the project environment will be described. The model is initially introduced through a plausible project narrative. The key principles of the model are then described, followed by an aggregation of these principles to holistically summarise the model.

### **6.1 Narrative of the conceptual model in context**

We will introduce our conceptual model through a narrative of a project scenario:

The Elmo Corporation has outgrown their current IT system. It is an *in-order-to* that is part of their *equipmental totality* which no longer meets their requirements. Elmo's last IT upgrade was problematic and their IT system is a cobbled aggregation of various technologies, and staff has distrust and apathy for the system and IT projects generally (*throwness*). Management has made a *choice* to undertake work (project work) to restore the *equipmental totality* of the corporation. They cannot change the current status of the corporation or their personnel, which is tightly coupled with the past (*throwness*). However, within these confines there are many *choices* about the nature of the upgrade and how it is done.

Management decide (*choice*) to implement a greenfield IT system with the assistance of a global software vendor. After much heated debate and *anxiety* they set their goals and objectives ('future state'). Two months into the project an issue arises because the new system has a radically different user interface which is unfamiliar to staff. Again, management face *choices*: to change the course of the project or to continue *projecting* along the current course. The issue has arisen due to not fully understanding the extent

of staff IT literacy *thrownness* and its incompatibility with a significant user interface change. This will be the first of many instances where the *thrownness* and / or enacted *projection (preferred choices)* of staff within the organisation or the appointed vendor do not align with management's *projected* future state IT system. Management start labeling known *thrownness* and *projections* that may not align with the proposed restored state as 'risks'. This brings to the fore the *ambiguous* and uncertain nature of the environment in which the project will unfold. And whilst management implements strategies to try and control these factors (or their impacts) they realise that ultimately the final trajectory of the project cannot be predicted. This leads to *angst (anxiety)* for those managing the project. At times their lack of ability to control the actions of certain stakeholders actually brings about *despair* given how management *care* to restore the situation.

Despite best plans, the restored IT system and the path to its implementation are unlikely to align (to varying extents) with the originally projected future state. At the point of completion, it is more accurately termed the 'restored state' that will reflect a series of emergent *choices, thrownness and projections*. It is not the 'projected future state'. This does not mean the situation has not been restored, but it may not be restored in the way it was initially *projected*.

## 6.2 The conceptual model in theoretical terms

We will now describe the conceptual model for understanding what can bring about *angst (anxiety)* in the context of project work by exploring three key principles in the model followed by the synthesis of these principles.

*6.2.1 Principle one: Past and future in the now*

As introduced in section 5.2.2, Heidegger proposes the concept of trifold temporality- where past, present and future affect one another and are unified. However, the only place of *choice* (revealed in action) is in the present. For example, at a given ‘now’ a decision is made to commence project work. The state of the organisation at that point is its ‘current state’ and in traditional terminology we may say that the objective of the project work is to reach some ‘future state’. However, this ‘future state’ does not yet exist. It can only ever be *projected* from a now. If we find ourselves in a situation which could be described as this ‘future state’ it is then the ‘current state’.

This point is critical as it highlights the emergent nature of projects and that the projected ‘future state’ at a given present (e.g. what one desires to achieve at the start of a project) is recognised as likely to be different (to varying extent) to that state which is actually realised (‘restored state’). This difference is due to the incrementally unfolding actions (*choices*) of those in the project environment. What actions are chosen (by others) cannot be predicted. At a high level, the difference between the projected ‘future state’ and the ultimately reached (or not reached) ‘restored state’ is a source of angst for those involved in projects. This concept is illustrated in figure 1.

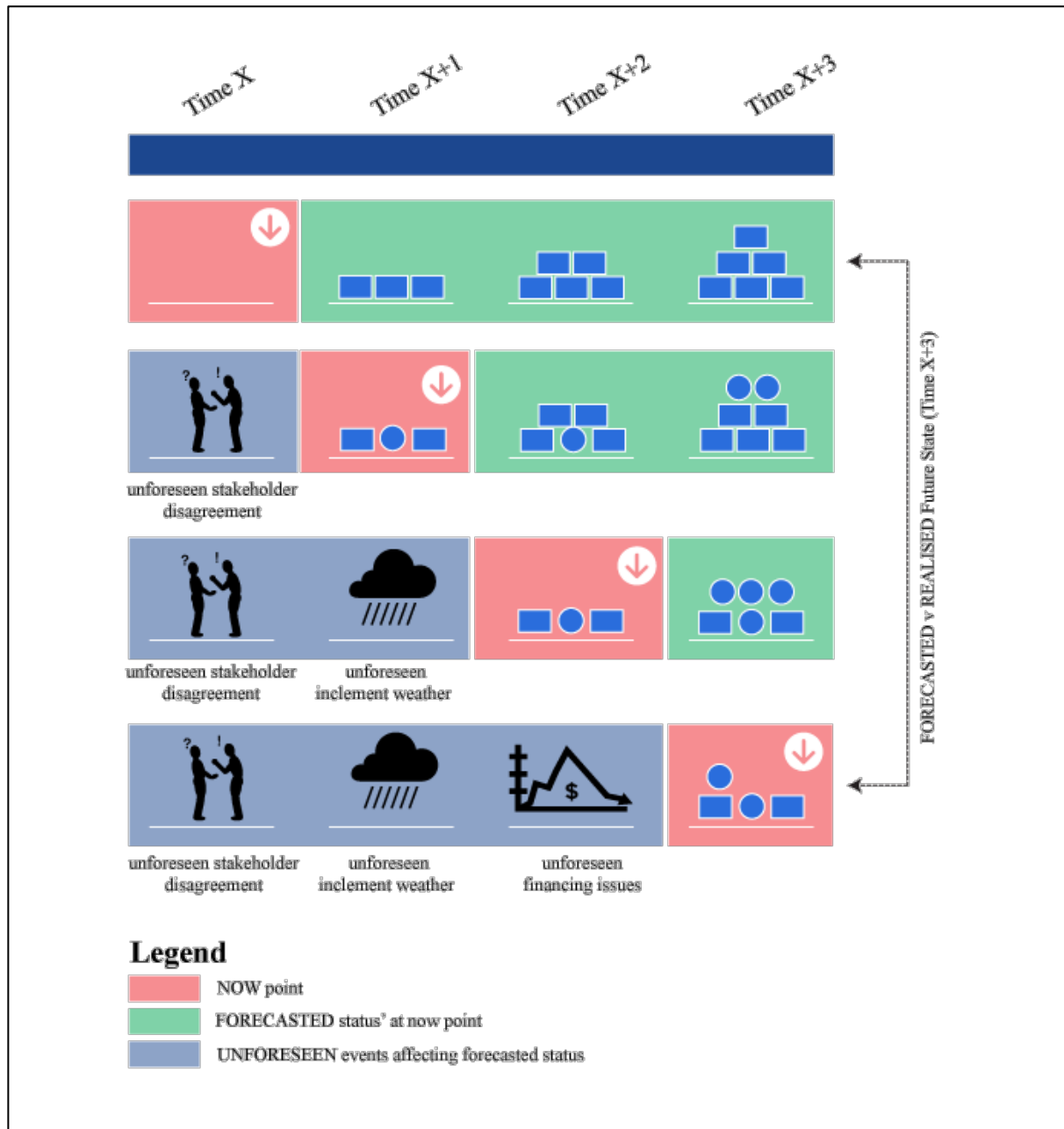


Figure 1: The uncertain and unfolding nature of project work

6.2.2 Principle two: We make choices, but so do others

Sartre emphasises that our essence and our futures are not predetermined (refer section 5.3.1).

To reiterate, all human beings have the *freedom to choose*. We not only enact our *choices* but also are affected by the *choices* of others. Furthermore, our *choices* available are constrained by our previous *choices* and the previous *choices* of others. The decision to instigate a project

is the exercising of *choice* (by a certain group of people in an organisation) - a *choice* to remediate a currently broken *equipmental totality*. This group will also *choose* (with varying degrees of consultation and agreement) the approach to restoring the situation. Other human beings in that *equipmental totality* equally have the *choice* to support, or not, the restoration and the planned approach to achieving the restoration. The *choices* that human beings make are aligned to what they *care* about. What *Dasein* care about varies from person to person and from group to group.

This concept of having *choice* can be a source of *angst* and potentially ultimately *despair* for those involved in the project work and in its environment. Firstly, there can be the *angst* that results from the responsibility of making *choices*. Are we making the right *choice*? What are the impacts for us and others of this *choice*? What if we had *chosen* differently? What about the options we have cut ourselves off from now? Many of the *choices* made in the project environment cannot be based on a set of rules or previously established norms. We cannot rely on guidance to what is ultimately the 'right' decision. The factors at play and the complexity of the environment require the decision makers to draw on a variety of concepts and to synthesise these to reach a decision, to make a *choice*. Arguable, even in decision making situations positioned as highly analytical and quantifiable (i.e. business cases) an element of subjectivity applies. This is not a negative judgment on subjectivity, but highlights that when we make *choices* there is likely to be a feeling of *angst* as to whether we are making the 'right' decision. The scale of this *angst* will vary from decision to decision. Decision-makers in their actions can choose to be *authentic* or *inauthentic*. *Authentic choices* which are contrary to accepted norms are likely to increase the decision-maker's *angst*.

Another source of *angst* associated with *choice* is in the potential for *choice* and action (both *authentic* and *inauthentic*) by others that does not align with our preferred *choice*. The need for *choices* (actions) is embedded throughout project work. Without this action (the result of *choice*) the restoration of the situation would not progress. As such, this need for *choice* (through action) but subsequent potential for conflict is imbued throughout the project. We would suggest however that as the project work draws towards completion the number of *choices* that can be made decreases and therefore the quantity of *choices* that could cause *angst* and *despair* decreases. This does not negate the potential increase in *angst* that may be caused due to the impending deadline. It is also noted that even if there is a decrease in the quantity of *choices* that can be made and have affect, the significance of the *choices* and their potential affect may be considerable. For example, towards the conclusion of an IT systems project a *choice* will be required to 'go-live'. Whilst the number of decisions to be made between that point in time and closure may be small, the significance of the decision and its impact may be assessed as significant.

### 6.2.3 Principle three: *Thrownness* affects our perceived choices

In section 5.2.2 we introduced the concept of *thrownness*. That is, what occurs in our past is imbued in us in the present. For example, if we have studied engineering at university we will have a particular engineering perspective on the world. We cannot change that we have studied engineering. However, we can change our attitude or approach to that experience, and how the knowledge manifests in our life will change as life unfolds. Many *choices* that we may need to make will be constrained by our *thrownness*.

In terms of project work, we can consider *thrownness* in terms of individuals in the organisation and the organisation collectively. At any given now, the organisation and each of its staff will have its *choices* constrained by its current being that is a result of its past (*thrownness*). The situation from which project work emerges (a broken *equipmental totality*) is a consequence of past *choices*. The approaches available to an organisation to undertake project work are constrained by their current state. For example, if an organisation is currently in a poor financial state they may have fewer choices available to them than an organisation that is more financial. As the project work unfolds, the prior activities of the project will affect the *choices* of those involved. For example, if productive stakeholder relations have been established the project manager may have greater *choices* in managing disruptive situations because stakeholders are inclined to be more cooperative.

In summary, whilst we have *choices*, the range of *choices* available to us is bounded by past *choices* (ours and others). And necessarily the *choices* we make now, which are made real in our action, will contribute to our *thrownness* and therefore bound the next *choices* and actions available to us.

#### 6.2.4 *The conceptual model as a whole*

These three principles can be aggregated to derive the conceptual model of anxiety in the project environment as illustrated in figure 2. We *choose* to project a new ‘future state’, and commit to action (because we *care*) to achieve this. Those with power in a project to make decisions will make *choices* that will (through subsequent action) affect the project work. However, those without official decision making power also make *choices* through their actions, and these also affect the project. For those making the ‘official’ *choices* they will

likely feel *angst* associated with no definitively right *choice* at each action. They are also likely to feel *despair* associated with an inability to control the *choices* of others who may affect the project (commonly termed ‘risk’) and the ability to reach the projected ‘future state’. They are also bound in their limit of *choices* by the *thrownness* of the organisation and those in it. The *angst* that arises in project work is due to the inability to have certainty in the alignment of the projected ‘future state’ to the realised ‘restored state’. And this ambiguity is a result of the freedom to *choose* possessed not only by those in official decision making positions but also by all those in the project’s environment. All those making *choices* can be *authentic* or *inauthentic* in their action and this can have implications for *angst* (refer figure 3).



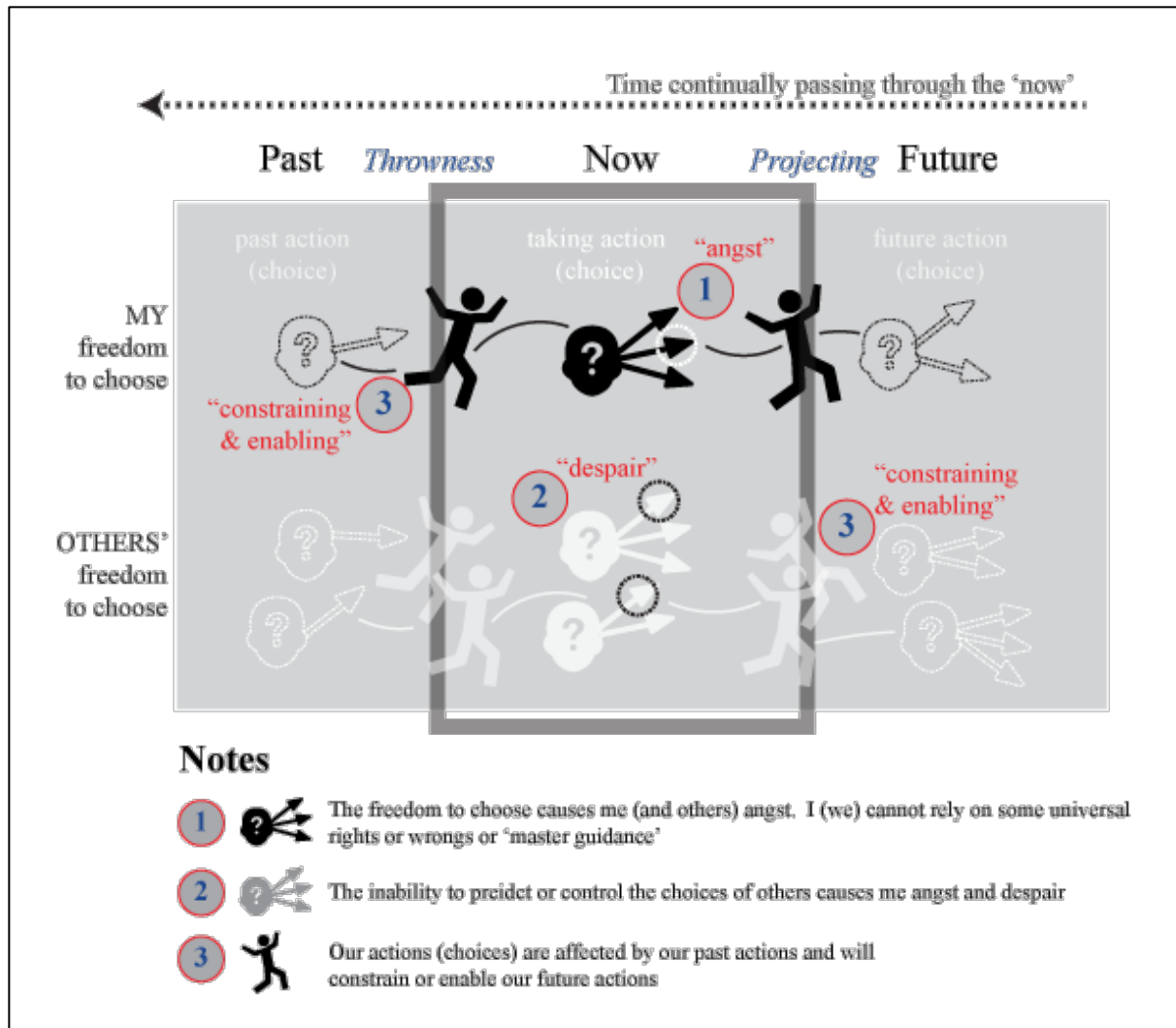


Figure 2: A Continental Philosophical Model for Angst in Projects

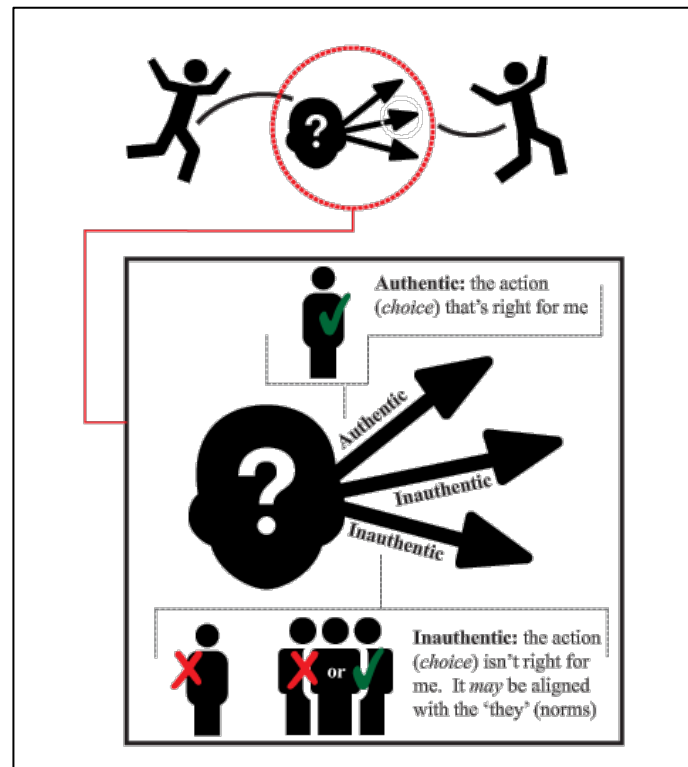


Figure 3: Authentic and inauthentic choices (action)

## 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

Having constructed a continental philosophical model for anxiety in projects, we will now utilise this to identify some preliminary insights and implications for our understanding of the ‘lived experience’ of project work. The following insights are not provided as a comprehensive description but rather highlight potentially interesting insights that can emerge.

### 7.2 The importance of understanding and valuing history- shared and personal

A key concept of the model is that the actions we have taken previously will affect our current being and what actions (*choices*) we perceive to be available to us now and in the future. These previous actions may have been *authentic* or *inauthentic*. In terms of project

work it highlights how the past of those involved (including their actions) will affect their response (actions) to activities of the project. It brings to the fore the criticality of soft skills in managing project work. By using this model as a discussion tool those involved in the project work can be made aware of their *thrownness* and the influence it has on their actions, responses, and feelings.

For example, consider a project manager who has been reprimanded in an earlier project audit for their casual approach to documentation and approvals. Their actions in the current project will be influenced by that earlier negative experience. They may be overly diligent in their documentation or seek approvals for even the smallest of changes. This diligence is a form of action, affected by the implications of previous actions - being less diligent and then subsequently reprimanded. If the project board or supporting management would prefer a more relaxed approach to management and are not cognisant of this *thrownness* it may be difficult for them to understand (and influence if required) the project manager's current approach.

Another example would be an employee who has been previously adversely affected by the actions of management in a previous project. The employee's responses (action) in the current project will be made with reference to that earlier (negative) experience. A project team that recognises and appreciates the influence of this past is likely to have greater chance of understanding and therefore influencing the actions of that individual in supporting the progress of the current project.

We are not suggesting that the importance of soft skills is a new concept, rather that the model provides a conceptual grounding for the criticality of these skills in the project environment. The degree of skill required to understand a diverse stakeholders group of varying *thrownness* is clearly significant. We suggest that project managers must utilise a variety of tools to understand the *thrownness* of their stakeholders and therefore position themselves to influence their actions in a direction commensurate with the project's objectives. Detailed exploration of how those involved in projects actually understand this *thrownness* of their stakeholders 'in practice' could be the source of further investigations.

Furthermore, this recognition of stakeholder *thrownness* and its influence on action provides conceptual grounding for the calls for a tailored approach to project management (for example refer: (Cicmil et al. 2006; Thomas & Mullaly 2008; Turner, Ledwith & Kelly 2012)). The many people involved in a project, their diverse history and actions, and therefore their varying current status and subsequent potential *choices* through actions, reiterates the complexity, uncertainty and uniqueness of project environments. In terms of this continental model any consideration that there would be one best way to manage such uniqueness is illogical. It highlights an opportunity to further explore how project managers uniquely respond to this complexity and ambiguity in their project work.

### **7.3 Understanding and responding in the project environment**

A central tenant of the model is that those involved in a project will be continually choosing actions (making *choices*). Again, these actions can be *authentic* or *inauthentic*. Given the wide variety of the *thrownness* of those involved in the projects (refer section 7.2), the diversity in the potential action (*choices*) of those involved is significant. Of note, is that

actions may not align to support project outcomes. This unpredictability in behaviour (actions) of those involved, a result of the freedom to *choose*, is a source of *angst* and *despair* for all those involved in project work. There is also *angst* associated with the burden of responsibility of making *choices*.

The first implication of this is that effective project participants will need to be able to deal with *anguish* and *despair*. Project managers, team members and stakeholders need to build (perhaps through training) strategies to deal with the *anxiety* and *despair* of making *choices* (the responsibility of taking action without reference to universal right or wrong) and not being able to have certainty in the *choices* of others. As introduced in the literature review there is existing recognition of this need to manage stress or anxiety in the project environment and this model supports the importance of furthering this line of enquiry.

A particular method to reduce the *anxiety* (that results from the *freedom* to *choose* actions) is to increase the likelihood of being able to predict and guide stakeholder actions.

Subsequently, project managers (and others) may attempt to influence the action (*choices*) of project participants to result in action that aligns with project objectives. This insight builds on the importance of getting to know stakeholders, to understand their *thrownness* and how this can influence the *choices* they perceive as being available to them 'now' (refer section 7.2). It also aligns with the literature regarding the importance of stakeholder management for positive project outcomes (for example: (Bourne 2005; Lovell 1993; Verma 1995; Winch & Bonke 2003)). Project managers need skills to get 'people on the same page', 'on message' and to build trust and a common understanding. Again, the importance of influencing and stakeholder management skills is not a new concept. However, this model provides

grounding for situating the criticality of these skills. It also reiterates the value in exploring how those in power influence stakeholder behaviour ‘in practice’.

The model also highlights that the actions taken (*choices*) can be *authentic* or *inauthentic*.

The implication for projects is that a given project environment may promote certain *choices* that are more or less *authentic* and this can have repercussions for the participants emotional well-being. For example, a project manager working in an environment that does not reward honesty in reporting may *choose* to hide schedule slippage or likely budget overruns even though they would prefer to share this reality (this would be their *authentic choice*). This non-disclosure is a type of *inauthentic* action, and in this case an *inauthentic choice* that will likely exacerbate the project manager’s *angst* which they will need to deal with in some way. The identification of the project environment as enabling or constraining certain behavioural *choices* has been identified in the literature, for example in terms of ‘just culture’ which encourages honesty in reporting and disclosing of issues without the fear of blame or retribution (Duffield & Whitty 2014). This model for anxiety in project environments provides support to the importance of such investigations and subsequent insights. Given that project participants have *freedom* to choose there is value in understanding the environment (situational context) of such actions (*choices*). The cultural environment will have an influence on the *choices* project participants perceive are available to them.

This discussion may have been read as inferring that *angst* is a purely negative emotion that should be avoided or entirely mitigated. However, we suggest that some project managers are actually drawn to this emotional experience and the challenges that it presents. They experience flow and a buzz from finding ways to manage in this complex, uncertain and

unique environment. They have a tolerance and desire for the experience of this emotion. This argument is supported by existing studies such as Whitty (2010) and van der Hoorn (in press). As such, this model of *angst* in the project environment should not be assumed to be a criticism or negatively-focussed conception of project work. Rather, it simply highlights a model (based on the philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre) of angst in project work.

#### 7.4 Summary

We have discussed three key insights that can be derived from the model. Firstly, the model provides new insights into the factors that contribute to the complex and uncertain nature of the project environment. The *freedom* of individuals to *choose* should be understood by those managing projects. It cannot be assumed that stakeholders will act in alignment with the objectives of the project. Additionally, given this variability in actions that could unfold, it confirms the futility of assuming that there can be one best way to manage project work. Projects are far too unique and complex for one-size-to-fit-all management approaches. Secondly, given project participants' *freedom to choose*, we have reinforced the criticality of soft skills to effectively manage project work. Project managers need to appreciate and understand the *thrownness* of their stakeholders and be able to influence their actions to be largely 'on the same page'. Thirdly, that this complex, uncertain environment (a result of the *freedom to choose*) is likely to cause *angst* and *despair* and that techniques and skills are required to deal with these feelings in this environment. As a side note, we have highlighted that the sense of uncertainty and feeling of *angst* in the project environment, and the subsequent challenge of dealing with this, may actually be desired by some project managers.

## **8 Conclusion**

This paper has outlined a model for understanding anxiety in the project environment that is grounded in the continental philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre. Three key principles underpin the model. Firstly, the model is underpinned in the concept of trifold temporality: past, present and future affect one another and are unified. Secondly, that the *freedom* (we and others) have to *choose* (act) is a potential source of *angst* and *despair*. The responsibility to *choose* can invoke *angst*. The inability to predict or control the *choices* of others can lead to *despair*. Finally, that past actions (*choices*) influence what we (and others) perceive our (their) *choices* to be.

We have discussed how the model confers the complex and uncertain nature of the ‘lived experience’ of projects. The model also highlights (in alignment with extant literature) the criticality of soft skills in the project environment. Specifically, soft skills are necessary to deal with the *angst* that is imbued in project work. Soft skills are also required to deal with the responsibility (and subsequent *angst*) of decision-making (*choices* or taking action), and the *angst* and potentially *despair* of being unable to forecast and potentially influence the *choices* of others. Those influencing the *choices* of others in the projects also require the skills to understand the impact of *thrownness* in the actions perceived to be available to people at a given point. From this, they are then able to influence (if they have sufficient skills) the actions of others so they align with project outcomes.



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