

# A Sky Full of Stars

## A Note on Meaning and Boredom

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## Essay

## A sky full of stars: A note on meaning and boredom

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“...in a universe in which everything is blue, the concept of blueness cannot be developed for lack of contrasting colors.” (Watzlawick et al. 1974, p. 12)

Professor Jack Meredith and Professor Jeffrey Pinto thoughtfully reflect on how the project management field has emerged the last 40 years in their essays (see Meredith, 2022; Pinto, 2022), or perhaps better captured, they reflect on the field of ‘project studies’. Since, the field, as well as IJPM, has moved beyond a unilateral project management focus and now involves research on project organizing, temporary organizations, multi-project management and the nature of project-based work (Gerald & Söderlund, 2018). Despite this progression in scope and perspectives, a noticeable pattern in Meredith’s and Pinto’s essays are expressions of fears. Fears of stagnation, repetition, exploiting similar patterns over and over again, not being socially useful for practitioners and a fear that we soon will reach the inflection point and become irrelevant and meaningless for both the research community and project practitioners. In my reading, they fear we shall enter stages of boredom by either painting a sky that makes practitioners feel alienated (Meredith, 2022) or painting a sky only in the color of blue (Pinto, 2022). In this essay, I will dig further into the concepts of boredom and meaning in relation to their discussions of relevance (useful and meaningful) in our project studies field.

### 1. On boredom and meaning

Boredom is the unfulfilled desire for satisfying activities (Mercer-Lynn et al., 2014); it is an unpleasant, transient affective state or emotion (Fisher, 1993) involving a spiritual and social alienation and lack of interest for the activity at hand (Mosurinjoh, 2016). When people are bored, they consider their activity, situation, or life to be

meaningless (van Tilburg & Igou, 2011). Research discuss whether it is the person, the situation or the interaction between person and situation that causes boredom (Mercer-Lynn et al., 2014). For example, in our modern society tendencies such as rationalization, commodification and ubiquity of digital technologies, systems and social media have been argued to produce a general disembodied ‘emptiness’ feeling, experienced as ‘boredom’ (Mosurinjoh, 2016). That is, we become bored when we are faced with a qualitative underload (too low mental demands, too much banality), qualitative overload (too high mental demands), quantitative underload (too little to do), (Fisher, 1994), and quantitative overload (too much noise and variety) - meaning and interest often is found in the mid-range between these parameters (Mosurinjoh, 2016). Hence, it is often in the tensions, surprises or deviations, from how we are taught things would be or should emerge, that the situation becomes interesting and allowing us to use our creativity and playfulness (March, 1971). These ‘imperfect’ situations trigger our reflexivity and often experiences as being meaningful, as long as they not are too incomprehensible. Just as Leonard Cohen sings: “Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack, a crack within everything, that’s how the light comes in.” (Cohen, 1992)

### 2. Meaningfulness and boredom in relation to practitioners

Meredith (2022) fears the field of project studies is losing its relevance (e.g. social usefulness) for practitioners, where usefulness and meaningfulness for our practitioners involves providing practical applicable new best practice tool, procedures, and check lists (Meredith, 2022). I interpret the fear as a fear of that we will alienate ourselves and become boring for the practitioners, e.g. practitioners cannot relate to our theories. I will nuance the thinking and argue the opposite; I believe we will bore them if we only provide them with simple, elegant, solutions. Practitioners face diverse problems, for ‘tame’ or ‘critical’

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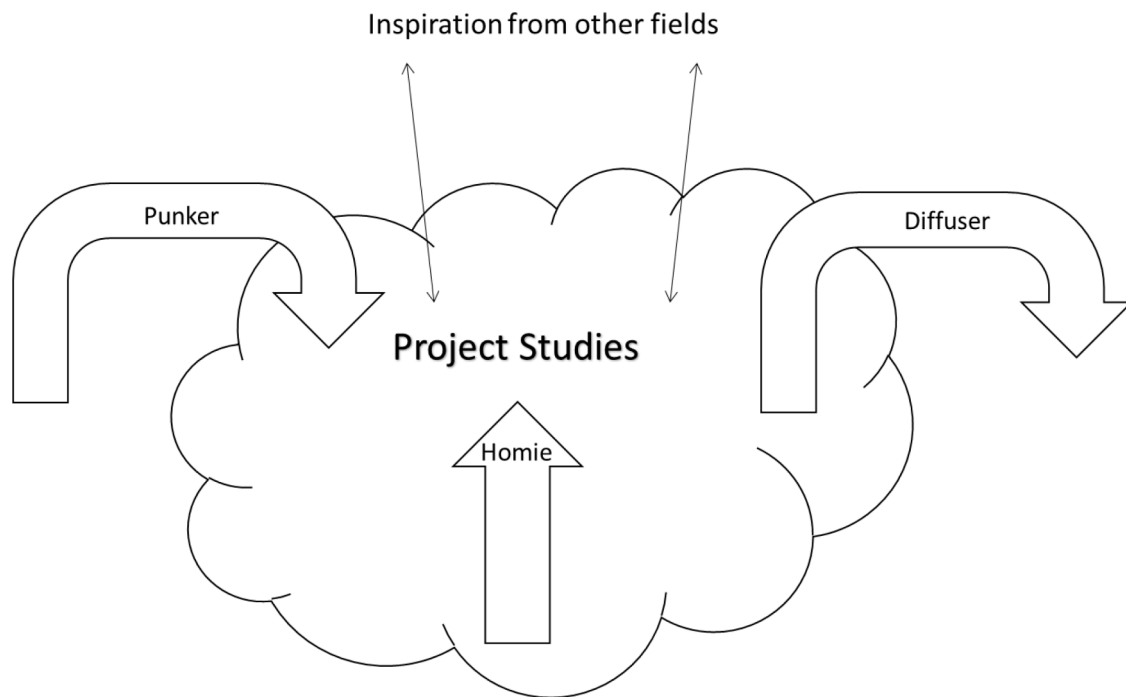


Fig. 1. Project Studies' Researcher Paths.

problems 'elegant' solutions, such as best practice standard operating procedures, are useful (Grint, 2010). However, many problems in project organizing are complex characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty situated in a dynamically changing environment (Davies, 2017), e.g. many problems are 'wicked'. Wicked problems need non-rational, non-perfect, clumsy solutions, argues Grint (2010). 'Clumsy' in the sense that we need to think, rethink, test, question, be playful, use our intuition and accept imperfection, rather than adopt a standardized elegant solution. If we give practitioners elegant solutions for wicked problems, we risk appearing banal, irrelevant and boring. For these problems, we benefit from shedding light upon the crack to let the light come in. To illustrate this, I provide a personal example.

I started my academic career with a Master in Engineering followed by a PhD at Lund University. After my PhD, I obtained an Assistant Professor position at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School (CBS), where Professor Kristian Kreiner works. Kristian Kreiner, as some of you might know, is always a bit 'punk', just as James March was. Kreiner is always challenging our minds, never mainstream, never afraid of provoking us to rethink by turning things upside down. One of my first teaching assignments at CBS involved co-teaching with Kreiner in a Decision Making, Risks and Uncertainties course (I was a topic newbie). During the first lectures, I felt insufficient, as I was not Kreiner, I could not express myself as beautifully and thought provocatively in relation the various theories as he could. Of course, I was a topic newbie, but I was also an engineer, taught and trained to think in a different manner, following a different logic. I realized it would require loads of training even to become a fraction of what he is. First, I entered a stage of despair and a feeling of uselessness, but then I thought that maybe CBS did not expect me to be a new "mini-Kreiner". I ended up doing the teaching in my way, while learning and being inspired by Kreiner. In the course evaluation, the students wrote that the lectures they appreciated the most were when I started explaining the concepts and theories in my engineering manner and where Kreiner thereafter made his thought provoking reflections. The students in this course study for a BSc in Business Administration & Project Management. It is a top program at CBS with one of the highest intake grades. My students are our future practitioners, they are smart, ambitious, dedicated and curious; they do not want to get bored. They appreciate both the point of

explaining the logics, links and mechanisms of a theoretical concept, as well as thought-provoking ideas and empirical examples.

The students in my example are not representative of all project practitioners in the world, but they are part of the new generation of practitioners, like your students. I think one important task we have as teachers is to stimulate their minds to become critically reflecting individuals and not bore them. I always give my students normative research articles and contrast them with descriptive ones. It is in the tensions and cracks the light comes in, it is when we contrast blue with other colors that we learn more about blueness. Diversity is important to stimulate our thinking and our feeling of meaning –it is a human condition - hence most likely valid for our hardworking practitioners. I believe usefulness in our field is a broader concept than 'Project Management for Dummies', and we do not necessarily appear alienating for practitioners if we present ideas that are a bit more intellectually interesting. There is a variety of practitioners, some like predictive solutions whereas others thrives and excites by complex, unpredictable, uncertain, ambiguous and intellectually stimulating problems, otherwise they get bored (conversations with several practitioners). A strength of the project studies field is that it is occupied by researchers, all loving projects, but who are interested in different aspects of the world of projects, which opens up the possibility for making the field interesting, meaningful and relevant; for a variety of practitioners.

### 3. Homies, punkers and diffusers in the search of meaning

Pinto (2022) express a fear that we will be too repetitive and 'stay in the same lane', hence become boring by too much banality and lack of variety (i.e. only painting the sky in blue). Let us look at who occupies our field. Our field involves a diverse set of researchers, all with a common curiosity of scrutinizing various aspects of projects. By scrutinizing the variety of researchers, their backgrounds, and actions, I have discerned three main researcher paths in our field: Homie, Punker, and Diffuser paths.

The *Homie path* involves researchers who are born and raised in our field. They publish primarily within the project studies field, attend primarily project studies research conferences and hold academic positions in project organizing or project management. The *Punker path* is

occupied with researchers that are born and raised in a different research field but have grown an interest for projects and project studies. They attend a variety of research conferences, both project and non-project ones, and often holds academic positions in, for example, innovation, strategy or organization studies. They publish both within and outside the project studies field and often bring in novel perspectives to the field. The *Diffuser path* involves researcher who started their research careers inside the project studies field but overtime strive towards making project studies relevant and diffused outside the field, hence try to speak to a broader audience by publishing in research journals like Organization Studies and Research Policy and attending research conferences such as EGOS and Academy of Management. Our field thereby infuses ideas from these three researcher paths, reaching within and beyond our field as shown in Fig. 1. The thinner arrows on the top of the cloud illustrate the more ad hoc inspirations we get when exploring and searching for novel ideas from other fields to explain what we observe in the project world.

Our field has advanced during the last 40 years, from being tool-based, narrow, hyper-specialized, and intellectually sterile (Pinto, 2022) to becoming more inclusive, diverse and more intellectually stimulating. Cross-fertilization and exchange of ideas are paramount for enabling disciplines to keep on learning from each other to address complex and changing empirical realities (Davies et al. 2018). That is, by continuously exploring ideas and literatures from different fields and daring to be playful in novel ways (March, 1971), we open up for stimulating processes of continuous refinement and renewal of our field – by weeding out irrelevant ideas as well as sowing novel ideas to see if they germinate (Dougherty, 2007).

A final note, the French painter, Edgar Degas (1834–1913) believed: “A painting requires a little mystery, some vagueness, and some fantasy. When you always make your meaning perfectly plain you end up boring people.” (The Art Story, 2021) So keep on painting our sky full of stars in a multiplicity of colors, without losing the focus on blue, or maybe at a closer look, you realize that blue in fact is red.

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