

# Rethinking Project Management: Researching the actuality of projects

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## Abstract

This paper puts forth the somewhat controversial position that what is needed to improve project management in practice is not more research on what should be done or the frequency and/or use of traditional project management practices. We argue that while a great deal is written about traditional project management we know very little about the “actuality” of project based working and management. This paper formulates a research approach that takes seriously practitioner’s lived experience of projects. We explore the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions underlying this kind of research and provide examples of some project management research originating from this perspective. We conclude by summarizing the findings from these studies and providing insights into the map ahead for future such research. In this kind of work the attention is refocused on praxis, on context-dependent judgement, on situational ethics and on reflexivity which enables social actors to see how power actually functions in context.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of the paper is to formulate and map a strand of research within the project management field that adequately addresses the ‘actuality’ of project based working and management. The paper draws on the aims, process and outcomes of the Rethinking Project Management Network, including the discussions that took place over its duration within and outside formal meetings, and on a number of joint initiatives among us, the authors of this paper, which resulted from our shared interest in methodologies and concepts relevant to this strand of research in the field. Our central claim is that a better understanding of *project actuality* – that is, of complex social processes that go on at various levels of project working, will inform equally beneficially the intended theoretical developments

in the project management field and practical action in project environments, and will contribute to more satisfactory outcomes of contemporary projects.

In the subsequent sections of this paper we will explain this claim by proposing a framework for conceptualisation of ‘project actuality’ and how we understand it. We do so by drawing on selected work in the field of sociology of management practice, on our own recent work in the PM field, on examples and insights from discussions and experiences generated from the ‘Rethinking Project Management’ Network meetings and sense-making papers, and on the aims and outcomes of the RPM Network, outlined and represented in Table 1 and Fig. 1 of the first paper in this special issue [1]. We will particularly outline two key aspects of the ‘project actuality research’ that we propose as unique in comparison with other strands of inquiry in the domain of project management: (1) the underpinning conceptual and philosophical considerations and (2) the methodological approaches and ‘treatment’ of empirical evidence. These are seen as complementary to (and not

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competing with) other strands of the project management research and they, together, enhance the intellectual foundations of the field in terms of its practical relevance and theoretical diversity.

## 2. Understanding project actuality

At this point, we draw the reader's attention to the paper in this issue by Winter et al. [1] which summarises and discusses the principle finding of the Network – the proposed shift in thinking and research orientation to tackle the identified and so far neglected themes from practitioners' experiences with project working and management in a novel way, thus creating knowledge which is relevant to practice and reflects the interests of both academic and practitioner communities. In a nutshell, the identified themes for collaborative investigation are the areas of project complexity, social process, value creation, project conceptualisation and practitioner development. Table 1 in [1] details the proposed directions, which have been used together with the methodological framework (Fig. 1 in [1]) to facilitate this paper.

## 3. Conceptual and theoretical considerations in project actuality research

We would like to start with the premise that 'project actuality' encompasses the understanding of the lived experience of organisational members with work and life in their local project environments. Their actions, decisions and behaviours are understood as being embedded in and continuously re-shaped by local patterns of power relations and communicative inter-subjective interaction in real time. The underlying assumption, that reflects practitioners' accounts, is that projects are complex social settings characterized by tensions between unpredictability, control and collaborative interaction among diverse participants on any project. Project management practice is consequently seen as a *social conduct*, defined by history, context, individual values and wider structural frameworks. With this kind of assumptions, actuality research, as a stream of thought, demonstrates a deep interest in *lived* experience of project actors, with the aim to understand what is actually going on in the arrangements labelled 'project' over time, to give an alternative account of what project managers do in concrete project situations and to explore skills and knowledge that constitute the social and political action in managing projects. Researching the actuality of projects means focusing on *social process* and how practitioners *think in action*, in the local situation of a living present.

In conceptualizing such an inquiry researchers typically engage in a reflective deliberation about theoretical traditions that address the issues of management as social conduct in the above outlined way, which results in pragmatic philosophical considerations of the issues such as complexity, power, intuition, decision making, collaborative

working, learning and communication, and the relationship between agency and structure in the local context. This represents a shift from a model-based, instrumental approach to researching projects and project management, towards a praxis-based theory and research. The former produces universal theory which, while sound, is not always useful in the specific context of application. The latter focuses on the empirical reality of projects by taking into account different contexts in which project management is enacted, thus addressing complexity, non-linearity, values, multiple perspectives and social processes in project environments. Researching the actuality of projects, therefore, consists of 'gathering, analysing, and disseminating knowledge about people working in concert with things, technologies, and each other and the means through which these relations are coordinated and controlled, for what ends' [2]. Similarly to what is being proposed with Table 1 in [1] as the outcome of the Network process, actuality research invokes the need for integrative pragmatic theory and the development of social knowledge and wisdom relevant to the context of project management practice.

Taking this research direction, scholars and practitioners 'may inspire the construction of theories which include the moral dimension of human conduct in organisations and explain the dynamics of complex processes over time' [3, p. 877]. In contrast to other types of project management research which draws on models and objective, instrumental rationality of actors, a pragmatic research of project actuality generates knowledge and builds theories which have the following qualities [3–6, among others]:

- the understanding of the actors' moral and ethical motives (practical reason) and their sense-making processes (enactment) and how their actions unfold over time and in connection with other, multiple events;
- the experience of emotions and feelings that drive action in complex environments;
- closer insight into intentions, political agendas and personal drives of individual actors; and
- the identification of tensions, power asymmetries and patterns of communicative relating among individuals and groups and how they are being negotiated in the context.

This kind of thinking is represented in Heidegger's concept of *da sein* or 'involved-in-the-world' manager [7]; processual approaches to studying management such as 'becoming ontology', e.g. [8] and 'complex responsive processes of relating in organisations' [5,9]; and a number of other works by writers who consider the relationship between agency and structure, and methodological approaches to theorising practice by connecting action to culture, structure, power, and patterns of intersubjective relating and dominant discourses, as being the key concerns in contemporary social theory [6,10–14, among others]. In this kind of work the attention is refocused on praxis, on context-dependent judgement, on situational

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