



Extending project management research: Insights from social theories

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Abstract

Our article answers the call for renewing the theoretical bases of project management in order to overcome the problems that stem from the application of methods based on decision-rationality norms, which bracket the complexity of action and interactions in projects. By grounding our reflection in the practice perspective and by adopting Nicolini's (2013) toolkit approach, we suggest ways that could help practitioners and theorists make better sense of aspects that are highly relevant for project management but are usually overlooked. The paper discusses Nicolini's five dimensions of practice and three social theories (activity theory, actor–network theory and structuration theory) to highlight the combinations that are most appropriate and fruitful for addressing various theoretical and practical issues requiring the attention of project management researchers.

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1. Introduction

The project management field experiences a revolution with two main drivers. The first driver is a practical reconsideration of prescriptions rooted in the rationality of decision theory, which seem to generate technical and commercial failures, internal and external conflicts, and inadequate responses to unexpected events (Miller et al., 2001). Project practitioners respond to these shortcomings by proposing new approaches, such as agile methods or partnering approaches, anchored in different rationalities (Highsmith and Cockburn, 2001). In turn, echoing the trend occurring in social sciences around the “practice turn,” academic researchers take a fresh look at what practitioners actually do in projects (Blomquist et al., 2010). The second driver is a

theoretical reconsideration of projects as temporary organizations embedded in different social contexts (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Packendorff, 1995). Researchers aim to better account for project phenomena and outcomes by redirecting efforts away from developing principles for optimizing plans, contracts and charts, and towards understanding the specific nature of social relations, structures and processes that occur in projects. In particular, they seek to draw upon fundamental sociological theories in order to deepen the understanding of project organizations (Levitt, 2012; Söderlund, 2004).

These two drivers generate advances that occur, to a large extent, independently of one another. Our aim is to suggest ways in which their forces can be combined in order to address more effectively the specific challenges that confront the project management field. To this effect, we hope to make three contributions in this paper. First, by reviewing practical issues in project management we propose ways in which the practice perspective can provide a theoretical and methodological lens enabling practitioners and theorists to make better sense of these issues and proposed solutions. In particular, we explain how

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Nicolini's (2013) five dimensions of practice can enlighten the practical issues we identified. Second, based on a review of the efforts to understand projects as organizations we suggest that they could benefit from the development of a theoretical toolbox based on three fundamental theories: activity theory, actor–network theory and structuration theory. Their proven contributions to the study of work and organization make these theories powerful tools for thinking and intervening in a project context. Moreover, they belong to the scholarly traditions that have contributed to the “practice turn” in social studies (Miettinen et al., 2009). By reviewing the key assumptions and arguments of the three theories, and by analyzing their compatibility with the practice perspective and the way project research has used them so far, we highlight new ways in which they can inspire the conceptualization of project organizations. Third, we develop rudiments of the proposed toolbox by combining insights from our discussion of the three fundamental theories and of the five dimensions of practice to suggest what theoretical perspectives more fruitfully address the different practical and theoretical issues we identified. These contributions are outlined in the following three sections of this article. Section 2 discusses practical problems and the possible contribution of the practice perspective with its five dimensions. Section 3 addresses the theorizing of projects as organizations and potential insights from the three theories we selected in understanding the five dimensions of practice. Section 4 outlines the rudiments of the proposed theoretical toolkit. A conclusion section closes our argument.

2. Practical problems and the practice perspective

Decision rationality, as expressed in decision theory, economics and finance (Bierman and Smidt, 1960; Milgrom and Roberts, 1992; Von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1943), has contaminated the conceptual underpinnings of many practical tools for project selection, organization, contract design, and activity planning (Garvin and Ford, 2012; Howard, 1988; Krishnan and Ulrich, 2001; Shapira, 1995). At the core of this perspective, a decision maker imagines alternatives for action, anticipates future evolutions, and emphasizes the logical consistency of the choice among these alternatives, in light of the values and probabilities attributed to the various possible outcomes of each action alternative. From this perspective, project planning is a series of decision moments, in which planners choose between alternative projects or output parameters; designing a contract is allocating responsibilities and risks between parties given the uncertainties and means of control that characterize its object (Chapman and Ward, 1994; von Branconi and Loch, 2004), and operational planning, guided by tools such as work breakdown structure, is a consistent programming of activities, given their anticipated length, dependencies and uncertainties.

But difficulties and failures associated with decision rationality (Ball et al., 2001; Flyvbjerg et al., 2002; Merrow, 1988; Standish Group International, 1994) led practitioners to question its validity and propose practical approaches that go against its tenets. Completion failures and “white elephants” resulting from rational decisions prompted practitioners to plan more iteratively and flexibly, elaborating successive visions, producing evidence

of their viability and mustering political support (Boehm, 1988; Miller et al., 2001). Likewise, conflicts and overruns resulting from rational schemes for contractual allocation of risk, including turnkey and public–private partnership forms, have led to agreements in which participants share risks and focus on collaborative problem solving (Cohen, 2010; Davies et al., 2009). The difficulty of anticipatively programming outputs and activities for complex projects and dynamic contexts prompted practitioners to develop agile approaches, in which commitments and advances are made in smaller increments, by analyzing the outcomes of prior increments and communicating intensively between participants (Aubry and Lièvre, 2010; Highsmith, 2004).

Such practical innovations suggest that a fruitful avenue for project management could be turning away from decision rationality and focussing on what happens in projects and on what practitioners do and say, seeking to understand the alternative “rationalities” involved in their actions (Cicmil et al., 2006). Some researchers already embarked on such a move and found a starting point in the practice turn that currently transforms many social sciences (Schatzki et al., 2001). Despite the polysemy of the practice perspective (Corradi et al., 2010) and the absence of a unified theory of practice (Reckwitz, 2002), a stream of research has blossomed around this concept in the project management field (Hällgren and Söderholm, 2010; Jerbrant and Karrbom Gustavsson, 2013; Smith and Winter, 2010; Smits and Van Marrewijk, 2012; Söderholm, 2008).

In essence, proponents of this project-as-practice approach argue that both practical and theoretical advances can result from studying the concrete actions of project participants, situated in their individual, social, material and historic context, as well as the network of shared and interconnected practices that form the field of project management practices (Blomquist et al., 2010). However, this impetus may suffer from the fact that many theories evoke, in one way or another, the concept of practice without necessarily clarifying it. We hope to ease such concerns by relying on Nicolini's (2013) work. Nicolini has been using a practice-based approach to study many complex settings such as healthcare (Nicolini, 2011), biomedical engineering (Nicolini et al., 2012), government (Nicolini et al., 2011) and construction projects (Nicolini, 2002). He was one of the guest editors of a special issue of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management* dedicated to the current “turn to practice” within organization and management studies (Eikeland and Nicolini, 2011). He has long stressed the need to explicitly address the social and psychological aspects of project management in a way that would speak not only to the research community, but also to practitioners (Nicolini, 2002: 171). His latest book (Nicolini, 2013) is the first successful attempt at synthesizing practice theory by clearly illustrating its potential to study work and organizations. He suggests that the practice perspective can be used as a *toolkit*, i.e. a package of theory and methods that allows for a rich investigation of social reality. Nicolini's (2013: 213) toolkit approach is “an eclectic strategy [that allows] to provide a thicker account of the world we live in”. This strategy follows a generative, rather than an eliminative logic, by turning conceptual diversity into a foundation for the analytical, not

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