



Project studies: What it is, where it is going

Joana Geraldi ^{a,*}, Jonas Söderlund ^b

^a Technical University of Denmark (DTU), Management Engineering, Engineering Systems Division, Denmark

^b BI Business School, Norway

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Abstract

Project organising is a growing field of scholarly inquiry and management practice. In recent years, two important developments have influenced this field: (1) the study and practice of projects have extended their level of analysis from mainly focussing on individual projects to focussing on micro- as well as macro-level concerns around projects; and (2) there has been a greater interest in different kinds of scholarly inquiry. Taken together, these two developments call for closer scrutiny of how the levels of analysis and the types of inquiry are related and benefit each other, and of the explanations of project practices they could offer. To discuss avenues for future research on projects and project practice, this paper suggests the notion of *project studies* to better grasp the status of our field. We combine these two sets of ideas to analyse the status and future options for advancing project research: (1) levels of analysis; and (2) type of research. Analysing recent developments within project studies, we observe the emergence of what we refer to as *type 3 research*, which reconciles the need for theoretical development and engagement with practice. Type 3 research suggests pragmatic avenues to move away from accepted yet unhelpful assumptions about projects and project organising. The paper ends with an agenda for future research, which offers project scholars a variety of options to position themselves in the field of project studies, and to explore opportunities in the crossroads between levels of analysis and types of research.

Executive summary: Rapid diversification of scholarly inquiry and management practice in projects may segregate the project research, but could also constitute an opportunity to strengthening it. For example, the diversity of ‘organisations’ or forms of ‘organising’ filled the field of organisation studies with new ideas and intellectual challenges. To take advantage of such developments, organisational scholars had to consider different forms of organising as part of ‘organisation studies’, and continuously adapt their frames of reference and forms of conceptualising organisations as a ‘research field’ and a ‘research object’. Concomitantly, they embraced alternative research interests, ontologies and epistemologies, which today enrich the field. Such dynamics build on scholarly reflexivity and could also, we believe, be fostered in project research.

Thus, responding to the diversification of the field, and inspired by the notion of ‘organisation studies’, we present the case of ‘project studies’, which acts as an umbrella for the studies in, on and around projects. ‘Project studies’ is novel as it does not propose an alternative perspective on projects, but instead calls for an *inclusive and integrative* research field for all perspectives, fostering vibrant dialogue and debate that welcomes different opinions and perspectives.

The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate the value of the notion of project studies and to call for reflexive scholars capable of navigating diversity by positioning their research in contrast with that of others. In particular, we focus on two recent developments that have contributed to the diversification of the field and offered new options for project scholars:

(1) the study and practice of projects have extended their level of analysis from mainly focussing on individual projects to focussing on micro- as well as macro-level concerns around projects; and

(2) there has been a greater interest in different kinds of scholarly inquiry.

We examined the different types of inquiries through the lenses of the three deep-seeded human interests proposed by Habermas: a) The traditional positivist tradition has its main interest on ‘solving the problems’ of project organising and increase its efficiency and effectiveness through better understanding of causal relationships surrounding projects. b) Interpretative research is grounded on our inherent interest to understand the world around us, but not necessarily ‘solve’ it. Rather, this research explores perceptions, behaviours and sees the world not so much in terms of causal-links, but complex networks with interesting cases and possibilities for learning. c) Emancipatory research is driven by

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: joasta@dtu.dk (J. Geraldi).

emancipatory interest and the pragmatic desire for changes in the status quo through the reorganisation of inherent contradictions, giving voice to minorities while addressing major economic and social problems. We termed them type 1, type 2 and type 3, respectively.

The juxtaposition of levels of analysis and types of research offers a matrix with nine areas to identify opportunities and to position research contributions in the field of project studies, extending current treatments of problems and topics to different levels of analysis and types of research. In particular, we would also welcome the strengthening of type 3 research across the three primary levels of analysis addressed in the present paper.

This paper provides a framework to encourage project scholars to reflect and become even more aware of nature and conduct of their research: the kinds of knowledge and interests they pursue, as well as the focus of their research. Our framework and analysis are exploratory and only build a tentative foundation for further exploration. We hope the present paper will trigger reflexivity on the making of project studies. In this spirit, we welcome further development as well as criticism to our main ideas.

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1. Introduction

Research on projects is diversifying at a rapid pace. We observe scholars using alternative theories, epistemologies and ontologies (Padalkar and Gopinath, 2016; Smyth and Morris, 2007), as well as moving the focus from the single project to embracing micro- (individual, team) and macro-level (organisations, society) concerns (Pollack and Adler, 2014; Söderlund, 2011). Such empirical, theoretical and methodological diffusion is welcomed given the impact, magnitude, frequency and diversity of contemporary projects, and the many challenges surrounding the numerous projects in our society (e.g., Flyvbjerg et al., 2009; Resolution, 2009; Winch, 2013). However, such diversity may segregate project management/project organising as an academic field for good or bad, as it can hamper the development of a common language, which can potentially threaten the accumulation of knowledge and a genuine and constructive dialogue within the field as well as between project scholars, scholars in other fields and practitioners. Accordingly and paradoxically, the popularity of projects in practice and academia could weaken the field as we know it.¹ Yet, simultaneously, such diffusion could also constitute an opportunity. For example, the diversity of ‘organisations’ or forms of ‘organising’ across countless contexts did not weaken ‘organisation studies’. On the contrary, the variety filled the field with new ideas and intellectual challenges. To take advantage of such developments, organisational scholars had to consider different forms of organising as part of ‘organisation studies’, and continuously adapt their frames of reference and forms of conceptualising organisations as a ‘research field’ and a ‘research object’. Concomitantly, they embraced alternative research interests, ontologies and epistemologies, which today enrich the field. Such dynamics build on scholarly reflexivity and could also, we believe, be fostered in the field of project research.

Thus, responding to the diversification of the field, and inspired by the notion of ‘organisation studies’, we present the case of ‘project studies’ – a novel and alternative way of understanding the field at its present stage of development, which acts as an umbrella for the studies in, on and around projects. The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate the

value of the notion of project studies and to suggest a framework to conceptualise core research choices in this area. Our first question revolves around what constitutes ‘project studies’. Our second question is concerned with the future of project studies. To address the second question, we consider research as a social process, and thus position project scholars and their research choices at the centre of project studies. Three central research choices are: *what* to study in project contexts, i.e. which level of analysis to explore and what object of analysis; *why* to study, i.e. what kind of knowledge is produced and how will it contribute to the field; and finally, deriving from the first two, *how* to study (ontological, epistemological and methodological) aspects and issues pertaining to projects. Research on projects and project organising is diversifying precisely around these three core areas. Our framework attempts to capture this diversity. We build and expand on Habermas’ knowledge constitutive theory (Habermas, 1972), and propose a framework that connects different types of knowledge interests proposed by Habermas with different levels of analysis. The framework is intended to foster reflexivity, and thereby revitalise existing research programs and point to new options and avenues for future studies.

In the next sections, we elaborate on the concept of ‘project studies’. We then discuss the relevance of the *project scholar* in shaping the nature and dynamics of project studies, and subsequently call for reflexivity to yield opportunities following the emerging diversification of this field. We then propose a framework to support the development of such reflexivity. The framework builds on the diversification of knowledge interests and levels of analysis among scholarly inquiries, and offers an agenda for future research for project studies.

2. Conceptualising project studies

We contend that the labels currently used for project management and project organising as an academic field no longer accommodate all the issues and challenges that it entails. The changing nature of the field is captured in the developments in its leading journal – the *International Journal of Project Management (IJPM)*. The number of citations in the *IJPM* has increased steadily over the last five years, reaching a social normalised impact per paper (SNIP) factor of 2.56,

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