

Project studies: What it is, where it is going?



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KEYWORDS

- Project studies
- Type 3 research

Article Highlight:

This paper proposes a new framework for project research, the project studies framework, containing three levels of analysis and three types of research.

What does the paper cover?

The paper captures two developments in the study of projects: first, project researchers not only study the projects, but the individuals working in projects, and the organisational and societal context of and for projects. Second, they observe a change on the interests driving research. The most common project research focuses on predicting and controlling projects (type 1 research), and on understanding projects and dynamics in projects (type 2). The authors observed examples and called for a stronger focus on emancipatory and engaged research (type 3), which is triggered by 'real life problems', challenges the unjust in the status quo and proposes alternative perspectives drawing from and integrating diverse knowledge fields.

The paper aims to show the value of project studies and encourages academic researchers to adopt diversity in research focus and methods. It invites researchers to debate and to build on the proposed framework to generate new research and respond better to contemporary societal and managerial challenges.

The project studies framework is not intended to be a new perspective on projects, but instead calls for an inclusive and integrative research framework encompassing multiple theories and perspectives. In doing so it paves the way for discussions among researchers with differing opinions and perspectives.

The paper focuses in particular on:

- the study and practice of projects where researchers have extended their level of analysis from projects to micro (individual) level and macro (organisational or societal) level concerns around projects;
- the recent greater interest in different kinds of academic inquiry and viewpoints.

The paper proposes a new framework for opening up and combining research fields and to better capture the various emerging trends in project-oriented research. It also offers a solid argument why project practitioners and scholars need to engage in analysis at multiple levels – individual, project, and organisation – to improve project competence and performance.

The project studies framework

The project studies framework, illustrated in the paper as Table 3, contains three levels of analysis and three types of research, which together form a matrix of nine kinds of inquiry.

The three levels of analysis are identified as micro, meso and macro. According to the authors, these different levels are all covered and addressed in current research in the field of project studies.

Level 1. Micro: individual-level studies; people, groups or teams in projects; psychology; project competence at the individual level; skills; careers; motivation; project overload; and so on.

Level 2. Meso: project-level explorations; collaboration; cooperation; coordination problems in projects; time management, communication, culture or conflicts in projects; temporary organisation; deadlines, planning and learning in projects; knowledge integration at the project level; and competence at the project level.

Level 3. Macro: project portfolio; project society; firm level; programme management; strategy; corporate change; project ecologies; industry development; innovation or project competence at the firm level; project capabilities; inter-project learning; and learning landscapes.

Drawing on the famous German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the authors propose three central types of research, each driven by a specific interest:

Type 1. Technical: control one's environment and solve problems.

Type 2. Understanding: interpret the world around us and understand one's self and others.

Type 3. Emancipatory: rectify that which is seen to be unjust and to challenge and change the status quo.

Combining any of the types within a level, or any levels within a type, could potentially lead to new and interesting inquiries for both new and established researchers

Methodology:

The paper builds on previously published articles by the present authors and others, spanning several decades.

Research findings:

Project studies can include research into project management, project organising, temporary organisation, the management of multiple or single projects, and the nature of project-based work. These may traditionally have been approached using different methods of research, but are nevertheless united as projects as a distinct form of research. The framework shows the importance of capturing multiple levels of analysis to understand current challenges in project-based work and project-based organising.

The authors point out that type 3 research is particularly challenging as it requires an understanding of practices and an engagement in communities' circumstances and languages to produce findings that are appropriate to those circumstances. At the same time, the research must be rooted in theories and theoretical understanding within and beyond management and organisation studies. The paper shows the value of multiple perspectives to understand increasingly complex projects with regards to technologies, stakeholders and integration.

Cooperating with researchers from other disciplines can be a way of enhancing type 3 research, and might also open up new cross-disciplinary projects.

Conclusions:

The framework and analysis presented in this paper are exploratory and intended as a foundation for further exploration. The hope is that other researchers will both build on it and offer their critiques on it.

Significance of the research:

Adoption of the framework can help researchers to define their positions as well as see forms of transcending barriers between different types of research, and thereby avoiding a 'silo' effect in research. The flexibility of the framework is a means to identifying both the differences and the overlaps between types of research. It should give researchers new opportunities to build on and extend current research in ways that may otherwise be less apparent or available to them.

Comments from authors:

The project studies framework offers a better and more contemporary view of the field – project management is one part of it, but there are so many more levels and perspectives involved – including what goes on at the individual, and what unfolds at the macro level, such as the organisation and societal levels.

Although principally a framework to stimulate new and better research on project-based work, projects, and project-based organisations, the paper is also important for generating a better link between research and practice.

We are interested in practitioners sharing their experience from different levels within the project-based organisation and engaging in a conversation about how different perspectives may foster a better address of their challenges and, subsequently, how these perspectives may provide them with new ideas on how to improve practice. Realising the centrality of both technical and hands-on knowledge whilst providing ideas on how to think differently about problems are all important concerns for practitioners – and these are areas to which scholars can contribute.

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Glossary:

Project studies:

An inclusive and integrative research field in, on and around projects aimed at offering a contemporary description of the status of project management research beyond research at the single project level.

Type 3 research:

Aims to find ways to challenge and change the status quo to generate new perspectives on how to address current problems.



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