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# The Socio-political dynamics and complexity of organisational change projects: A research agenda

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## Abstract

There has been a rapid and significant growth in the use of projects as a method to drive the implementation of organisational change, thus a shift to a management paradigm. In practice, a project manager is often allocated to projects post scoping where the focus is on governance and execution; often with little understating of the real problem statement and the socio-political dynamics of the project environment. This paper provides a critical literature review which explores the current state of research relating to organisational change projects and argues that increased attention to socio-political dynamics and complexity within the front-end of projects would likely influence assessment of project viability, scope and approach. The paper identifies a gap in the literature focused on the pre-initiation phase of complex organisational change projects that puts people and uncertainty at the heart of this phase. It draws on the dynamics of the project environment, people and decision making under the umbrella of complexity during the critical pre-initiation phase of a project, where real value can be injected or destroyed. In doing so, the paper outlines a research agenda to inform future empirical work which is likely to hold significant implication for the boundaries of the project management discipline and the role of project management practitioners.

**Keywords:** complexity, project management, organisational change, socio-political,

## Introduction

With historical roots in the engineering discipline, project management has been dominated by a rational, linear approach (Johnson 1997, Levene 1996, Eisenhardt & Tabrizi 1995, Whittington & et al, 1996, Morris, 1994), but is increasingly applied in complex organisational settings (Hall, 2012). Exploring the unresolved contradiction between non-linearity and controllability within the pre-initiation phase of complex change projects could deliver a significant contribution to interdisciplinary research across project management and organisational change theory, along with stretching the traditional boundaries of project management for the practitioner.

There has been a rapid and significant growth in the use of projects as a method to drive the implementation of organisational change and continuous improvement to processes (Pellergrinelli and Bowman, 1994; Grundy, 1998; Turner, 1999; Stryhre, 2011; Hall, 2012). The pre-initiation phase<sup>1</sup> of projects is considered as a critical success factor (Miller and Lessard, 2001; Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Mier, 2008). However, in practice project management often refers to the execution of a project post scoping and indeed, a new or different project manager may be assigned after the scoping and pre-initiation phase (reflected in the professional bodies 'Books of Knowledge' (APM, 2006; PMI, 2008)). If this is the case, it becomes questionable who is or should be responsible for leading the scoping of projects and whether the complexities of social and political dynamics of the project environment are explored and considered during this phase.

As with many fields of management there is not one agreed definition of project management (Soderlund, 2011). As noted earlier, the value proposition behind project management is changing rapidly. For the purpose of this paper, the following definition is selected 'a project is the whole of a group of activities limited in time and space, inserted in, and integration with a political, social and

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<sup>1</sup> that is from the point when the project exists conceptually and before it is planned and implemented, from the time the idea is conceived until the decision is made to finance it (Williams and Samset, 2010)

economic environment, towards a goal progressively refined by the dialectic between the thought (the project plan) and the reality' (Bredillet, 2010, p23). The chosen definition of project management is some distance from the traditional definition of being a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service (Project Management Institute, 2008). The driver for the preferred definition is that it incorporates the political and social dynamics which puts the context of the environment at the core of the definition, along with its interaction with the more traditional view on project execution. This paper will unpack some of the reasons why the social and political elements are crucial to the future of project management research and practice (Morris, 2013).

This paper engages with the literature on domains, paradigms and role boundaries and explores the shifting terrain within project management to further understand the implications to the practitioner and to the academic discipline. Secondly, this paper explores taking socio-political dynamics and complexity seriously. It is generally accepted that projects are becoming more complex, with one of the key reasons behind this relating to the increased bidirectional interaction between the social and technical aspects (Balio and Price, 2003; Henrie and Sousa-Poza, 2005).

### **Domains, paradigms and role boundaries: A shifting terrain?**

Project management is transforming from traditional infrastructure-based sectors to a management paradigm as project management is being used to drive and deliver organisational change (Kuhn, 1962; Williams, 2005; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). There is evidence to suggest that there is a need for a shift from a dependence on planning and control to a more organic managerial model (Bredillet, 2004; Crawford, et al. 2006; Pollack, 2007; Kolltveit, et al. 2007). There is a growth in project management being used to effectively manage and control change within organisations and therefore can be considered an important business process in its self, that touches many other processes and stakeholders (Hall, 2012). Stryhre (2011) identifies the opportunity project management can make to enabling creativity outside the norms of organisational structures, which is key to change projects. Whilst organisations may be using discrete projects to encourage innovation and change (Curran and Niedergassel, 2009) the reach and impact is not discrete with many aspects of the organisation and its stakeholders being touched.

It is noticeable that projects with substantially different characteristics are emerging, which are inherent in organisational change projects where socio-political dynamics of the project environment are key (Hall, 2012). This has potential implications for the discipline's future research and development of practitioner training that go beyond the linear and often deterministic approaches thus far adopted (Winter & Szczepanek, 2008; Antonacoulou E and Michaelides R, 2014). In addition, project management experience and skills are seen increasingly as a growing expectation of the modern manager (Leybourne & Sainter, 2012), therefore the significance and reach is wider than purley the project management domain.

However, there appears to be a lack of work within the discipline in the area of complexity during the front-end work of projects. Instead, a great deal of the literature focuses on practitioner tools and training focused on the management and control of projects within a seemingly rational environment. Incorporating and acknowledging the complexity of the organisational environment appears a far better context by which to appreciate the needs of and demands on the Project Manager.

The foundations of project management as a discipline explains the existence of the rational, linear approach that is dominant. Project management's historic foundations arise from engineering, operations and organisation theory (Morris, 1994; Eisenhardt and Tabrizi, 1995; Levene, 1996; Whittington et al., 1996; Johnson 1997) with prescriptive research being the core (Ahlemann, et al., 2013). Literature focused on scheduling and control within projects with high certainty during the 1960s (Biedenbach & Muller, 2011). This was followed by a decade of work focused on teamwork and bringing temporary teams together effectively (Biedenbach & Muller, 2011). In addition

management writing and research saw a shift from governance and structures to process during this period (Biedenbach & Muller, 2011). The 1980s saw an emergence of complex projects and the literature sought to reduce uncertainty, as a key aspect of complexity, in projects with the use of boundaries to exclude or manage out complexity. The discipline has now shifted towards looking at dynamism, uncertainty and the changing characteristics of projects and complexity (Laufer et al., 1996; Cicmil S at al., 2006; Winter at al., 2006), but it is acknowledged that there is still a need for this to go beyond attempting to measure complexity (Sense, 2011; Antonacopoulou and Michaelides, 2014). This suggests the focus on control and management of projects in a very rational way has influenced the project management practitioner tools and training where are still very visible now with the professional associations and key methodologies such as Prince2 and Six Sigma.

Project Management has been seen as a discipline focused on planning and organising resources to deliver project outputs within the accepted golden project management triangle of time, budget and scope (Granot and Zuckerman, 1991; Atkinson, 1999; Williams, 1999; Meijer, 2002; Jaafari, 2003; Stryhre, 2011; Antonacopoulou and Michaelides, 2014). Shifting the discussion from these mechanical one size fits all approaches to a more contingency perspective with an improved understanding of the organisational response within its context is supported by Geraldi (2011) and Williams (1999).

The literature suggests that a unified area of research does not exist within project management, therefore project research is considered as being in a pre-paradigmatic state (Bedeian, 2004; Bredillet, 2010; Hallgren, 2012), with paradigms being defined as being the combination of a basic belief system or world views (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Soderlund's (2011) paper, which supported the notion of pluralism for the discipline, was a response to Koskela and Howell's (2002) controversial paper entitled 'The underlying theory of project management is obsolete', which made a bold statement that described project management as a discipline that was in a crisis and that a long overdue paradigm change had to be realised. Hallgren (2012) who analysed research question construction and the contribution to theory development within project management research presents a different perspective that turns the previous discussion on its head. This work identified a lack of research question or focus and in turn Hallgren (2012) suggested a greater contribution could be generated if the research question was constructed from a theoretical view point.

Often the project manager is appointed at the stage where the focus is on the execution or implementation of the project with little or no time on the requirement setting; often jumping straight to the implementation of a solution without understanding the real problem statement or the dynamics of the project environment within complex change projects. It is acknowledged that the pre-initiation phase is where a real value can be injected or destroyed (Faulconbridge and Ryan, 2002). Best practice relating to this phase can be very deterministic and covers elements such as setting objectives, defining the resource frame, defining the activity portfolio, deciding on structures, defining implantation methodologies and establishing rules and processes for information procedures and systems (APM, 2006; PMI, 2008). Geraldi et al. (2011) criticised this deterministic approach due to its lack of connection to the project context.

A project can be delivered on time, within scope and in budget, as per the golden triangle of project management, which remains the core of practitioner training (Granot and Zuckerman, 1991; Atkinson, 1999; Stryhre, 2011; Antonacopoulou and Michaelides, 2014) but if the project scope was not sufficiently developed then the benefits the project delivers are questionable. Studies on critical success factors studies support the need for better front-end work, with firstly a focus on socio-political factors and stakeholder engagement (Rycroft and Szyliowicz, 1980; Morris and Hough, 1987; National Audit Office, 2004) and secondly a need for better defined project requirements and mission that contribute to organisational strategic priorities (Pinto and Slevin, 1987; Whittaker, 1999; National Audit Office, 2004, Lind, 2011). The importance of quality during the front-end phase is

noted by many (World Bank,1996; Miller and Lessard, 2001; Flyvbjerg at al., 2003; Meier, 2008; Flyvbjerg 2009; Williams, et al. 2009). Wearne, (2014) empirical work provides evidence that supports the view that poor discipline at the front-end of projects results in much ‘fire-fighting’ in project execution

The front-end phase of project management is becoming an increasingly popular area of work in domains such as the analysis of needs and benefits (Naess 2009), risk management, business cases and stakeholder analysis (Williams and Samset, 2010), but the need of future work is agreed in areas such as the alignment of projects to organisational strategic intent and complexity - to include the interrelatedness within project decisions, uncertainty implicit in change projects and the social and political dynamics within decision making (Williams et al. 2009, Williams and Samset, 2010; Morris, 2013,). Hjortso and Meilby (2013) highlight that complexity is often added to projects due to the influence of stakeholders’ whose position was not necessarily understood or uncovered during the front-end phase. The decision making process during the pre-initiation phase is critical to the success of the project in terms of delivering strategic intent. It is a time when most decisions will have the biggest impact and during a time when there is limited knowledge and high complexity (Williams and Samset, 2010). Conversely a review of the literature demonstrates an assumption of principles of bounded rationality (Simon and March, 1958) where decision makers have the full knowledge of all alternatives.

These traditional tools and assumptions are focused on delivering projects in a managed and controlled way rather than exploring a deeper understanding of the complexity of projects (Leybourne, 2007). The importance of the pre-initiation phase is understood, but the work in this area has been much slower than the development of tools for the execution stage (Morris, 2013; Williams and Samset, 2010). This presents a further gap in the literature around decision making during the pre-initiation stage of a project. Building upon the argument that decision making during this stage of change projects is critical, a further important interrelated factor is human behaviour. It is clear from the literature that a better understanding of the neglected human dynamics of project management is needed (Curran and Niedergassel, 2009). A common theme to project success or failure is around people, whether it be the selection of the project manager, the management of the process of engaging stakeholders or decision making (Henrie and Sousa-Poza, 2005).

### **Socio-political dynamics of the project environment**

Despite the focus on prescriptive research a number of key authors within project management claim that it suffers from a low adoption rates (Ahlemann et al. 2009) which arises a fundamental question around the impact of research. The literature suggests that a combination of the lack of consideration of the usage environment or project context (Besner and Hobbs 2006, Morris et al. 2006, Russo et al. 1996), too much of a distance between the relationships of researchers and practitioners and the lack of theory underpinning project management research as key factors.

It is generally accepted that projects are becoming more complex, with one of the key reasons behind this relating to the increased bidirectional interaction between the social and technical aspects (Balio and Price, 2003; Henrie and Sousa-Poza, 2005). The nature of dynamics within managing projects, in particular the emerging use of projects to deliver change within organisations has not been explored fully within the current project management literature and therefore there is a need to understand better the dynamic nature of complexity within projects and how an individual or organisation responds to it (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Austin et al, 2002; Thomas and Mengel, 2008; Sense, 2011; Antonacopoulou and Michaelides, 2014). The literature on complexity within the project management discipline has in general examined complexity of projects by focusing on complexity theories to aid identification and measurement of complexity (Mason, 2001, Cicmil and Marshall, 2005; Ivory and Alderman, 2005; Cooke-Davies et al., 2007; Vidal & Marle, 2008). Geraldi (2011) develops this further by highlighting the need to move beyond measuring complexity to further

understanding of it and how complexity can be actively managed for the better outcome of deliverables that are aligned to strategic intent. This demonstrates an assumption that rational control of complexity is possible and desirable (Stacey, 2001; Wood, 2002).

A key thread via the literature on complexity with the project management literature is uncertainty. Whilst there is a body of thought that see uncertainty and complexity as two separate concepts (Baccaromo, 1996), there is also a strong view from other authors that uncertainty is a key element of complexity (Williams, 1999; Turner and Cochrane, 1993). The literature within project management on ambiguity provides a similar definition as uncertainty where ambiguity is perceived when there is a lack of clarity, high complexity and more than one plausible alternative (Hagen and Park, 2013; Martin, 1992). Hagen and Park (2013) also argue the acceptance of ambiguity by the project manager is a key critical success factor. It has been suggested that for projects with higher levels of uncertainty more soft skills are required by the project manager than what the traditional project management frameworks and methodologies currently provide (Pich, et al., 2002).

Whilst the growing trend of project management being used as a mechanism to deliver change is generally accepted (Grundy, 1998; Pellegrinelli & Bowman, 1994; Turner 1999 pg 35.), there is an inherent tension between the literature on successful change management and the recognised project management paradigm of plan and execute in a controlled manner (Leybourne, 2007). Whilst there is an acknowledgement of a shift away from the traditional, structured project management approach (Clegg & Coupasson, 2004; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006; Winter et al., 2006; Smith, 2007; Brown 2013) the implications can be problematic due to the tension between controllability and uncertainty

There is a body of literature that recognises human actors within projects as important which brings with it potentially conflicting interests and different behaviours (Maylor, 2001; Clegg and Coupasson, 2004). The work of Cicmil et al. (2009), which drew on the work of Cooke-Davies et al. (2007) and R Stacey's (2001) work which focused the emergent properties of groups of people as 'complex responsive processes of relating'. Socio-political complexity has been examined with a focus on measuring complexity relatively recently (Geraldi & Adlbrecht, 2007; Maylor, et al., 2008; Remington & Pollack, 2007). Socio-politically complexity has also been focused on the study of the ambiguity or uncertainty of agreement between stakeholders which Reminton and Pollack (2007) grouped under the term 'complexity of interaction'. It has been suggested that the socio-political dynamics within change projects are significant influences to the project outcomes (Leybourne, 2006). Whilst there has been a shifting focus from traditional of planning in the prescriptive mode to a more behaviour approach there remains a contested space academically between the two camps (Leybourne and Sainter, (2012). The traditional camp focuses firmly on process and control which limits the role boundaries and responsibilities of the project manager to one of implementation with the golden triangle of cost, time and quality. Whilst the emerging view considers there a need to resolve uncertainty caused by the project environmental turbulence. It is suggested that one key driver for the pace of shift more towards the behavioural camp will increase as further understanding of the dynamics of the project environment is developed (Cook-Davies et al. 2007).

Managing activity over tasks is a new challenge for the project manager (Leybourne, 2006). Geraldi (2009) describes complexity as partly inherent and partly induced within projects which suggests that project managers should consider complexity as being negotiated. This suggests support for the notion that project managers need to embrace complexity within organisational change projects. Morris (2013) recently stimulated thought around the role of the project manager crucially being the single point of integrated accountability from the earliest stage of the project right through to the end to deliver the outcome desired by the sponsor and where possible the stakeholders. Note, Morris (2013) talks about outcomes not tasks and the project manager having a key role from the earliest point of the project, this requires understanding of what is trying to be achieved by the project and

the underlying reasons for this. Morris (2013) develops this idea further by recognising the need to understand and influence the projects environment to enable the alignment of the project outputs to strategic intent. Morris (2013) talks about shaping the context or environment, and the importance of understanding the context to improve the understanding of the organisational and individual responses to complex projects is further supported by Brown and Eisenhardt (1997); Austin et al. (2002); Augustine et al. (2005); Thomas and Mengel (2008); Geraldi (2011). Geraldi (2011) explicitly identifies this as a critical success factor of delivering successful complex projects which deliver outputs.

## Conclusion

The pre-initiation phase of projects is arguably the time when particular decisions will have the biggest impact, during a time when there is limited knowledge and high complexity (Williams and Samset, 2010). This calls for a dynamic view of the interrelatedness of project decisions, the uncertainty implicit in change projects and the social and political dynamics within decision-making (Williams et al., 2009; Williams and Samset, 2010; Morris, 2013). Yet, traditional project management tools and their underlying assumptions are premised on delivering projects in a managed and controlled way, rather than exploring a deeper understanding of complexity and uncertainty (Leybourne, 2007). To serve this task, a better understanding of the neglected human dynamics of projects is needed (Curran and Niedergassel, 2009).

The key questions these knowledge gaps suggest the discipline needs to answer are how (and the extent to which) the socio-political dynamics of the project environment are considered during the pre-initiation phase of organisational change projects. This leads to two further issues. First, the literature on complexity within the project management discipline identifies the need to move beyond measuring complexity to further understanding of it and how complexity can be actively managed for the better outcome of deliverables (Geraldi, 2011), which demonstrates an assumption that rational control of complexity is possible and desirable (Stacey, 2001; Wood, 2002). To move towards this understanding, we need to know what tensions exist, if any, between embracing complexity with the project management tradition of controllability during the pre-initiation phase of complex organisational change projects. Second, questions exist around specific responsibility for leading the scoping of projects and whether the complexities of social and political dynamics of the project environment are explored and considered during this phase.

The reconceptualisation of the front end of project work, in the manner mapped out here, has far reaching implications for the project management discipline and the role of project practitioners. In practice, a Project Manager is often allocated to projects at a stage where the focus is on the governance and execution of the project with little or no time on the requirement setting; often jumping straight to a solution without understanding the real problem statement and the dynamics of the project environment within complex change projects. Geraldi et al., (2011) criticised this deterministic approach due to its lack of connection to the project context. This paper suggests that developing a better understanding of the dynamics of a projects environment (political and social dynamics) would contribute to exploring the tension between the prevalent project management tradition of control and the complexity of the project environment. The proposed research agenda will aid future thinking on the assessment of project viability, scope, approach and the role of the project management practitioner during the pre-initiation phase of organisational change projects.

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