



University of
**Southern
Queensland**

PROJECTIFICATION AS PERMISSION: HOW BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE JUSTIFY AND ENABLE PROJECT MANAGING AS DISCRETION, JUDGMENT, AND ETHICAL ACTION

A Thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the projectification of the public sector, analysing how standardized project management methodologies, such as PRINCE2 and the PMBOK® Guide, both constrain and enable managerial discretion, judgment, and ethical action. While these methodologies are designed to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability, their application within public sector institutions is far from uniform. Rather than serving as rigid control mechanisms, they function as flexible, interpretive structures that grant institutional legitimacy to project managers, allowing them to exercise strategic autonomy while maintaining bureaucratic credibility.

This thesis is based on three interconnected studies, exploring how public sector project managers navigate and negotiate these methodologies in practice. Using a qualitative interpretivist methodology, this research incorporates:

- Semi-structured interviews that examine the lived experiences of nine senior project managers in an Australian state government.
- A focus group investigation which develops a typology of how project managers engage with formalized project management processes
- A theoretical analysis, drawing on Derridean deconstruction and Arendtian action, that conceptualizes project managing as a process of practical deconstruction, a dynamic negotiation between structure and flexibility.

A key contribution of this thesis is the Pragmatic Comportment Compass, a framework that categorizes the four primary ways project managers interact with methodologies:

1. To Use – Employing formal methodologies as intended
2. To Manipulate – Adjusting methodologies for contextual needs
3. To Circumvent – Bypassing bureaucratic constraints when necessary
4. To Suffer – Enduring rigid structures when adaptation is not possible.

The findings challenge conventional views of projectification as a top-down process and instead position it as a mechanism that legitimizes discretionary action within

bureaucratic constraints. Furthermore, this thesis extends the concept of projectification beyond organizational governance, arguing that it reshapes professional identities, work structures, and institutional norms.

This research has significant theoretical, practical, and policy implications.

Theoretically, it redefines projectification as a negotiated governance mechanism that balances institutional control with managerial autonomy. Practically, it highlights the need for adaptive project management approaches that acknowledge the reality of discretion in public sector work. At the policy level, it calls for governance frameworks that integrate structured flexibility to ensure that project managers can operate effectively within political, administrative, and operational constraints.

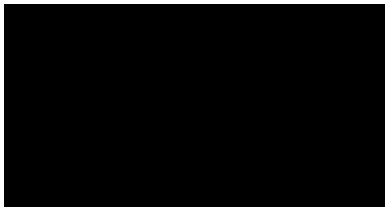
By bridging organizational theory, project management research, and public sector governance, this thesis provides a nuanced perspective on the evolving role of project managers, demonstrating how the structuring of operational conditions enables both constraint and agency in public sector project managing.

Keywords: Projectification, Public Sector Project Management, Discretion, Standardization, Practical Deconstruction, Pragmatic Comportment Compass, Governance Adaptation

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I Kevan Michael Rowe declare that the PhD Thesis entitled *Projectification as Permission: How Bodies of Knowledge Justify and Enable Project Managing as Discretion, Judgement and Ethical Action* is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes.

This Thesis is the work of Kevan Michael Rowe except where otherwise acknowledged, with the majority of the contribution to the papers presented as a Thesis by Publication undertaken by the student. The work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award, except where acknowledged.



Date: 8th May 2025

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Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

I, Kevan Michael Rowe, declare that I made the majority contribution to the research and authorship of the papers included in this PhD Thesis, Projectification as Permission: How Bodies of Knowledge Justify and Enable Project Managing as Discretion, Judgement and Ethical Action. My contribution exceeded 50% for each paper. The contributions of co-authors are acknowledged in each publication.

Paper 1

Rowe, KM, Whitty, SJ & van der Hoorn, B 2024, 'Creating authority and autonomy: Necessary dialectical tensions in public sector project management', *Project Leadership and Society*, Vol. 5, 100119.

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Student contributed 80% to this paper. Collectively Assoc Prof Whitty and Dr van der Hoorn contributed the remainder.

Paper 2

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Student contributed 80% to this paper. Collectively Assoc Prof Whitty and Dr Wheeldon contributed the remainder.

Paper 3

Rowe, KM, Whitty, SJ & Wheeldon, A, (Under Review) 'The Ethics of Project Managing: Permission, Discretion, and Judgment in a Projectified World', *Journal of Political Philosophy*. Submitted Feb 2025.

Student contributed 80% to this paper. Collectively Assoc Prof Whitty and Dr Wheeldon contributed the remainder.

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As a young and motivated Australian public servant, I was drawn to project management as a career. I would overhear corridor conversations about meetings with Ministers, high-level executive briefings, and once-in-a-lifetime projects: hospitals, stadiums, schools. From what I saw, public sector project managers operated in the engine room of politics and society, which is exactly where I aspired to be. I got my opportunity in October 2008, and quickly realised that project delivery was shaped by more than just formal processes. This research emerges from what I witnessed firsthand and aims to benefit both practitioners and the discipline by revealing the actualities of project work.

Jon Whitty, I am forever grateful for the journey you have taken me on. You taught me the importance and craft of philosophy in understanding the world around me. I have come out of this journey a better person because of you. I thank you for the time you have invested into me. Bronte van der Hoorn and Anita Wheeldon, your ideas and input gave my research so much originality. Your support and tips from your own PhD journeys motivated me to keep forging ahead. I am privileged to have such an amazing supervisory team.

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DEDICATION

To my father Kevan John Rowe (18 August 1938 – 31 May 2024), you taught me how to be strong, resilient and to break through the impossible in pursuit of my dreams and aspirations. It is very interesting that your beliefs on defying the impossible ended up being a vital component of my research and it makes me so fulfilled that there is a piece of you in this thesis. After leading the Western Australian Police Force for many years, what you taught me constitutes the mindset of a successful public servant. Delivering public value was at the core of your values and through you, it is engrained in me too. You were so proud of me when I told you I was undertaking a PhD, and you continued to be my biggest fan throughout the journey.

Here it is Dad.

I did it.

May your light shine forever.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full Term
BoK	Body of Knowledge
DBO	Design-Build-Operate
EVM	Earned Value Management
IPMA	International Project Management Association
KSA	Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities
NPG	New Public Governance
NPM	New Public Management
OPM	Organizational Project Management
P3M	Project, Program, and Portfolio Management
PCT	Pragmatic Comportment Theory
PPM	Project Portfolio Management
PMBOK	Project Management Body of Knowledge
PMI	Project Management Institute
PMO	Project Management Office
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PRINCE2	Projects IN Controlled Environments (Version 2)
RQ	Research Question
SME	Subject Matter Expert

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

1.1.1 Overview of Projectification in the Public Sector

The concept of projectification was first introduced by Midler (1995) in the context of industrial organizations and has become increasingly relevant in public administration. Projectification refers to the growing reliance on projects as a dominant mode of organizing work, shifting from traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical structures to temporary, goal-oriented initiatives (Lundin & Söderholm 1995; Packendorff & Lindgren 2014). In the public sector, projectification has accelerated due to governance reforms such as New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG), which emphasize efficiency, flexibility, and results-based accountability (Fred 2018; Jensen 2023).

Projectification has introduced both opportunities and challenges for public administration. On the one hand, projects offer governments the flexibility to respond to policy issues, test new initiatives, and mobilize inter-organizational collaboration (Sjöblom, Löfgren & Godenhjelm 2013; Fred & Hall 2017). On the other hand, excessive projectification can lead to fragmentation, temporary workforce structures, and weakened institutional memory (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015). The increased reliance on project-based governance also raises concerns about accountability and long-term sustainability in public service delivery (Hodgson et al. 2019).

1.1.2 The Role of Project Management Bodies of Knowledge (BoKs)

Project management methodologies such as PRINCE2 and the PMBOK® Guide have played a significant role in the institutionalization of projectification in the public sector (Hodgson et al. 2019; McGrath & Whitty 2020a, 2020b). These frameworks, developed primarily within the private sector, provide structured approaches to project delivery, standardizing key processes such as risk management, stakeholder engagement, and performance measurement (Morris et al. 2006; Svejvig & Andersen 2015). Professional associations like the Project Management Institute (PMI) and the International Project Management Association (IPMA) have further reinforced the legitimacy of these methodologies by promoting certification programs and best practices (Blomquist, Farashah & Thomas 2018).

Despite their widespread adoption, BoKs have been criticized for their rigidity when applied in public administration (Hodgson et al. 2019). Unlike private sector projects, public sector initiatives must navigate political constraints, evolving policy objectives, and complex stakeholder environments (Fred 2020). Research indicates that public sector project managers often adapt or modify BoKs to accommodate these challenges, balancing methodological structure with practical discretion (Mukhtar-Landgren 2021).

1.1.3 The Paradox of Control vs. Discretion in Public Sector Project Managing

A central tension in public sector project management is the paradox of control versus discretion. Formalized methodologies promote structured decision-making and regulatory compliance, ensuring accountability in government projects (McGrath & Whitty 2019). However, strict adherence to standardized processes can be impractical in dynamic public sector environments, where political imperatives and stakeholder demands often necessitate adaptive responses (Jałocha 2024).

Successful public sector project managers often deviate from formalized methodologies, exercising professional judgment to navigate political pressures and bureaucratic constraints (Fred & Hall 2017). This discretion is essential for managing uncertainty, accommodating stakeholder interests, and addressing emergent risks (Karlsson 2019). As a result, project managers operate within a liminal space, balancing the need for structured governance with the realities of dynamic project work that require adaptability and decision-making autonomy.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.2.1 The Issue of BoKs Being Perceived as Rigid but Actually Enabling Flexibility

BoKs are frequently perceived as rigid, imposing standardized project management processes that constrain professional discretion (Morris et al. 2006; McGrath & Whitty 2019). However, empirical research suggests that BoKs do not simply enforce control, rather they function as institutional artifacts that create space for project managers to exercise flexibility while maintaining legitimacy (Fred 2020).

This paradox, where BoKs appear restrictive but enable discretionary action, challenges conventional assumptions about public sector project management. Studies indicate that project managers do not apply BoKs as fixed rulebooks but instead interpret and modify them to fit organizational and political realities (Mukhtar-Landgren 2021). While methodologies

such as PRINCE2 and PMBOK® provide an authoritative framework, they also allow project managers to justify deviations and negotiate authority in complex governance contexts (Fred & Godenhjelm 2023).

Understanding this paradox is central to the research problem posed by this thesis. When BoKs are perceived as rigid yet function as enablers of discretion, public sector project managing must be conceptualized not as a mechanical application of rules, but as an interpretive and adaptive practice. This raises critical questions about whether BoKs should be refined to enhance control or whether their current form which allows room for flexible application better supports public sector needs.

1.2.2 The Importance of Discretion, Professional Judgment, and Ethical Action in Project Managing

The research problem also engages with broader debates on the role of professional discretion, judgment, and ethical responsibility in project managing. Standardized methodologies promote control and predictability, aligning with bureaucratic principles of governance (Fred & Hall 2017). However, public sector projects operate in environments where strict procedural adherence may not always lead to optimal outcomes (Karlsson 2019).

Scholars argue that professional discretion is a necessary feature of public sector project work because it enables managers to balance regulatory compliance with pragmatic decision-making (Fred 2018). Unlike private sector projects, public sector initiatives involve complex political and ethical considerations, requiring project managers to navigate competing interests, social accountability, and stakeholder expectations (Godenhjelm & Fred 2023). The ability to exercise judgment, rather than strictly follow methodologies is critical in ensuring that projects remain aligned with public interest and policy objectives.

This research positions project managing as an ethical and interpretive practice, where discretion is exercised not in defiance of BoKs, but through their strategic adaptation. By examining how public sector project managers navigate the tension between control and autonomy, this thesis contributes to an evolving understanding of projectification not as a process of rigid standardization, but as a mechanism that legitimizes professional judgment and ethical decision-making.

1.3 WHY THE TITLE CAPTURES THE RESEARCH

The title of this thesis—*"Projectification as Permission: How Bodies of Knowledge Justify and Enable Project Managing as Discretion, Judgment, and Ethical Action"*—encapsulates the central argument emerging from the research findings. Rather than viewing projectification as a process that merely imposes standardized methodologies onto organizations, this research demonstrates that projectification functions as a mechanism of permission, legitimizing the ability of public sector project managers to exercise discretion, professional judgment, and ethical action in practice.

The phrase *"Projectification as Permission"* reflects the key finding of Chapter 4, *Creating Authority and Autonomy: Necessary Dialectical Tensions in Public Sector Project Management* (Rowe, Whitty, & van der Hoorn, 2024). This chapter argues that bodies of knowledge (BoKs) do not simply enforce control but instead create a paradoxical dynamic where project managers gain both authority and autonomy. This study shows that BoKs are not rigid rulebooks but institutional artifacts that enable project managers to justify discretion within bureaucratic constraints. In public sector environments where strict adherence to methodologies is often impractical, BoKs serve as a form of institutional legitimacy that allows project managers to navigate complexity while still appearing to comply with formalized standards.

The second half of the title—*"How Bodies of Knowledge Justify and Enable Project Managing as Discretion, Judgment, and Ethical Action"*—clarifies the specific ways in which BoKs function within public sector project work. The word ‘justify’ highlights how BoKs provide a recognized framework that project managers use to defend their decisions, especially in complex situations where ethical considerations or stakeholder needs demand an adaptive approach. This aligns with the findings of Chapter 5, *The Pragmatic Comportment Compass: Rethinking Projectification in Public Sector Projects* (Rowe, Whitty, & Wheeldon, 2024). This chapter demonstrates that project managers engage with BoKs in multiple ways. Sometimes using them as intended, sometimes manipulating or circumventing them, but always positioning their actions within the broader institutional legitimacy BoKs provide.

The term ‘enable’ reinforces that BoKs do not merely allow discretion but actively create the conditions necessary for project managing to take place. Chapter 5 identifies four primary ways in which project managers interact with formal methodologies: using, manipulating, circumventing, and suffering. These comportments illustrate that project managers do not

simply comply with methodologies, but instead work through and around them as necessary to achieve project success. The research shows that BoKs in their current form offer a productive tension between structure and flexibility, allowing public sector project managers to interpret and apply them in ways that suit their specific project environments.

Chapter 6 titled "The Ethics of Project Managing: Permission, Discretion, and Judgment in a Projectified World", further supports this argument by situating project managing as an interpretive and ethical practice. Drawing on Derridean and Arendtian perspectives, it argues that project managers operate within a structured yet ambiguous space where meaning is constantly negotiated. This aligns with the deconstructive nature of BoKs, they appear authoritative yet contain contradictions that allow for discretionary action. This chapter demonstrates that BoKs function as a form of arche-writing; an inscribed system of legitimacy that project managers use to justify actions that may deviate from formal processes but align with ethical and stakeholder considerations.

Finally, the title defines 'Project Managing' as an activity inherently characterized by discretion, judgment, and ethical action. The research collectively demonstrates that real-world public sector project managing is not about mechanical application of methodologies but about professionals making informed, ethical decisions within a structured yet adaptable framework. Chapter 6 highlights that attempting to refine or over-specify BoKs could be counterproductive, as their very ambiguity is what enables professional discretion.

Thus, the title effectively reflects the findings of this research by capturing the idea that projectification grants permission for project managers to operate with professional discretion, justified by the very methodologies that appear to constrain them. It highlights the paradox at the heart of public sector project managing: BoKs do not enforce strict control but instead provide the necessary ambiguity that enables judgment and ethical decision-making in practice. By framing projectification as permission, this title encapsulates the argument that BoKs should not be abandoned nor excessively refined, as their current form is precisely what allows project managing to function effectively.

1.4 RESEARCH AIMS & QUESTIONS

1.4.1 Research Aims

The primary aim of this research is to explore the relationship between public sector project managers and project management reference documents. Particularly focusing on how these

documents shape, constrain, or enable discretion, judgment, and ethical action. While reference documents such as PRINCE2 and PMBOK® are often seen as rigid frameworks, this thesis investigates how public sector project managers engage with these methodologies in adaptive and interpretive ways.

By analysing the lived experiences of project managers, the practical and political dimensions of project managing in the public sector is uncovered. The thesis critically examines the role of discretion by exploring how managers strategically negotiate authority within structured governance frameworks while maintaining legitimacy and accountability.

1.4.2 Research Questions

This thesis is structured around three key research questions:

- 1. What specific conditions in public organizations challenge the applicability of standard project management reference documents?*

This question investigates the contextual and organizational constraints that make it difficult for project managers to adhere strictly to standardized methodologies. It examines bureaucratic rigidity, political pressures, and stakeholder demands that influence project work.

- 2. Under these challenging conditions, which elements of reference documents are often not enforced or are suspended?*

This question explores how project managers selectively apply, modify, or disregard elements of project management methodologies when faced with practical constraints. It identifies patterns in decision-making and discretion, highlighting which aspects of BoKs are maintained and which are adapted.

- 3. What can the findings from RQ1 and RQ2 reveal about the relationship between public sector project managers and their reference documents?*

This final question aims to theorize the role of project management methodologies in legitimizing discretion and decision-making. It examines how project managers use these frameworks as both sources of authority and tools for adaptation, ultimately positioning projectification as a process of negotiated governance.

By addressing these research questions, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how public sector project managers interact with formalized methodologies. It challenges the assumption that BoKs merely impose control, instead highlighting their function as flexible, interpretive tools that enable professional judgment. The findings will inform broader discussions on projectification, governance, and discretion in public administration.

1.5 A ROADMAP FOR THE THESIS CHAPTERS.

This thesis examines the extent to which public sector project managers and organizations utilize project management processes to deliver projects. Since this study is conducted through a publication-based format, Chapters 4 and 5 contain the published papers and summaries of relevant literature. This section provides an overview of how the thesis is structured and how each chapter contributes to the overall argument.

CHAPTER 2:

- **Literature Review:** sets the foundation by exploring the concept of projectification in the public sector. It outlines historical developments, key theoretical debates, and the complexities of applying standardized project management methodologies in bureaucratic environments.
- **Contribution:** The literature review draws together the key theoretical and empirical contributions that inform the arguments developed across the thesis and support the extended discussion in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 3:

- **Research Design:** discusses the methodological framework underpinning this study. It explains the interpretivist-phenomenological approach and justifies the use of qualitative research methods to explore how project managers engage with and interpret project management methodologies.
- **Contribution:** The thesis is structured around three components, each contributing distinct but complementary insights into public sector project managing. Chapter 3 describes how the overarching research philosophy is explored through each individual paper.

The next three chapters contain the substantive research findings:

CHAPTER 4:

- Presents the first peer-reviewed paper, *Creating Authority and Autonomy: Necessary Dialectical Tensions in Public Sector Project Management*, published in *Project Leadership and Society* (Rowe, Whitty, & van der Hoorn, 2024). This paper investigates the dialectical tensions between authority and autonomy in public sector project management, examining how project managers use reference documents to assert legitimacy while exercising discretion in their work.
- Contribution: Chapter 4 enhances our understanding of project managing in the public sector, focusing on the role of reference documents, language, and hierarchies. It proposes a deconstructive theory of project managing, exploring the dialectical relationship between project managers and their work.

CHAPTER 5:

- Introduces *The Pragmatic Comportment Compass: Rethinking Projectification in Public Sector Projects*, also published in *Project Leadership and Society* (Rowe, Whitty, & Wheeldon, 2024). This chapter develops the Pragmatic Comportment Compass; a conceptual tool that categorizes four primary ways in which public sector project managers engage with formal methodologies, whether by adhering to, manipulating, circumventing, or suffering under them.
- Contribution: Chapter 5 identifies how project managers thrive not by following these processes rigidly but by strategically choosing when to leverage, manipulate, bypass, or endure the system, as illustrated by the 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass.'

CHAPTER 6:

- Presents the third study of this doctoral research, offering a conceptual paper that extends beyond the findings of the two empirical studies. Rather than summarizing or interpreting previous results, this paper develops new theoretical insights by critically synthesizing key themes and empirical evidence. It engages with broader philosophical and theoretical debates to advance an original conceptualization of project managing as an act of practical deconstruction. The analysis argues that methodologies provide not only frameworks for action but also legitimizing structures

that enable project managers to exercise discretion, navigate complexity, and engage in ethical judgment.

- Contribution: This chapter makes a distinct contribution to knowledge by reframing projectification as a mechanism of permission rather than control, presenting a theoretical perspective that is informed by, but not limited to, the earlier empirical studies.

The final two chapters discuss and conclude the thesis:

CHAPTER 7:

- The discussion: begins with a vignette of a day in the life of Project Manager Alex Morgan which synthesizes the key themes emerging from the research. Through storytelling the findings are linked to broader discussions on projectification, discretion, and governance in public sector project work.
- Contribution: Through storytelling, Chapter 7 describes the intricate interplay of institutional constraints, stakeholder expectations, and the interpretive agency exercised by project managers that occurs on a daily basis to reinforce the thesis overall philosophical positioning.

CHAPTER 8:

- The conclusions, offers a reflection on the contributions of this thesis, its limitations, and potential avenues for future research.
- Contribution: Chapter 8 emphasizes how projectification, rather than merely imposing control, provides a framework that legitimizes the discretionary actions of project managers.

THE PLATES:

To further support the coherence of the thesis and provide conceptual orientation for each major chapter, four visual Plates are included before Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7. Each Plate serves as a symbolic and interpretive entry point to the study that follows. Plate 1 introduces the central tension explored in Chapter 4, showing how reference documents simultaneously constrain and enable discretion. Plate 2 precedes Chapter 5 and depicts the Pragmatic

Comportment Compass, visually articulating the adaptive orientations of project managers within bureaucratic systems. Plate 3 frames Chapter 6, drawing on philosophical figures to explore how ethical action persists amid uncertainty. Plate 4 introduces the final Discussion chapter, synthesising the thesis's core proposition by illustrating how projectification enables the discretionary space through which project managers make judgment calls and pursue meaningful delivery. These Plates function not simply as illustrations but as interpretive devices that reinforce the thesis's narrative arc and philosophical commitments.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis investigates the extent to which public sector project managers and public sector organisations utilise project management processes to deliver projects. As a thesis undertaken by publication, substantive Chapters 4 and 5 present published papers, and Chapter 6 presents a paper prepared for submission, each incorporating relevant literature within their scopes.

This chapter provides a broader review of the extant literature, drawing together key theoretical and empirical contributions that inform the arguments developed across the thesis and support the extended discussion in Chapter 7.

2.1 PROJECTIFICATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR CHALLENGES

2.1.1 Evolution of Projectification

Since the mid-1960s, scholars have argued that society and its institutions are becoming increasingly projectified, with work being organized around time-limited sequences of action and interaction (Miles 1964; Bennis 1968). This shift toward project-based structures was initially conceptualized as an increase in the use of project work but has also come to encompass a wider tendency to frame processes as discrete, temporary endeavours (Packendorff 2002).

The term projectification was introduced by Midler (1995) in his seminal study on Renault's transformation into a project-oriented organization. His work built upon Gareis (1989) 'Management by Projects' approach, which proposed a new management paradigm considering the relationship between projects and organizations, as well as inter-project dependencies. Around the same period, Lundin and Söderholm (1995) made an early reference to the broader 'projectification of society', arguing that organizations were increasingly adopting project-based structures beyond their traditional industrial applications. However, they also criticized the lack of empirical data to substantiate this claim (Wagner, Huemann & Radujkovic 2021).

Following Midler's introduction of projectification, scholarly interest in the concept expanded significantly, both in terms of analytical depth and research scope. Early studies predominantly focused on the projectification of industrial organizations and the professionalization of project management (Packendorff & Lindgren 2014; Jensen, Thuesen & Geraldi 2016; Jacobsson & Jałocha 2021). However, from the late 1990s onward, critical

perspectives emerged, questioning the broader social and organizational implications of projectification. Scholars such as Boltanski (2005) examined its sociopolitical ramifications, while others focused on how project-based work was becoming a fundamental building block of organizational operations (Morris 1997; Hodgson & Cicmil 2007).

2.1.2 PRINCE2, PMBoK and Other Standards

The contemporary understanding of projects evolved first in the middle of the 20th century within the US military and space programs. The overwhelming scale in terms of resources and ambitious timing of military and space projects such as the Manhattan Project or the Apollo space programs created daunting challenges of coordination and control, which led to a professionalization of the project manager (Winch 2000; Grabher 2002; Engwall 2003). Several techniques for project planning and project monitoring developed during this period, such as the Work-Breakdown Structure (WBS), Gantt chart, Critical Path Method (CPM), Graphical Evaluation and Review Technique (GERT), and Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) (Fred 2018). PERT, for example, was created by the U.S. Navy while developing the Polaris Missile project (Fred 2018). Concerned about the Soviet Union's growing nuclear arsenal, the US government wanted the Polaris project completed quickly, and used PERT to coordinate the efforts of some 3,000 contractors involved in the project (Kerzner 2005). Despite criticism (Morris et al. 2006; Smyth & Morris 2007) and awareness of the shortcomings of these techniques and models, they have retained a firm grip on the project manager's toolbox over the years (Fred 2018).

Another contributing factor is the extensive activities of professional associations like the Project Management Institute (PMI) and the International Project Management Association (IPMA). The overarching aim of these associations is quality assurance in project management through standardization of techniques and certification of project managers (Morris et al. 2006). The underlying view of associations such as the IPMA and the PMI is that projects are fundamentally similar and the same methods, models and tools can be applied to all organizational environments including contracting, the private sector, as well as the public sector (Fred 2018). These models and standards aim to provide guidance in project practices, with one important ingredient being project-specific vocabulary and language (Fred 2018).

The PMI centrepiece standard is the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). The PMBOK is a detailed framework of nine knowledge areas, broken down into activities

across five stages or process groups of the project life cycle. This is claimed to encompass the sum of knowledge generally recognized as good practice in the project management profession (Matos & Lopes 2013). In addition to these detailed knowledge areas, tools and techniques, PMBOK also notes that effective project management requires an understanding of the application area, project environment, general management knowledge and skills, and interpersonal skills (Project Management Institute 2021a).

PRINCE and PRINCE2 are registered trademarks of the British Government. The latest version of this methodology upholds a generic approach to become flexible to the point of shaping all types of design, making it a practical reference, possible to apply to any type of project, scale, organization, geography or culture (Gardiner 2002). The main features of this methodology are its business focus. An organizational structure directed to the project management team so planning is done with an orientation toward the final product and its emphasis is on the division of the project into phases (Gardiner 2002; Matos & Lopes 2013).

2.1.3 The Expansion of Projectification Research

As projectification gained prominence across disciplines, its definition and interpretation diversified, leading to multiple conceptualizations (Jacobsson & Jałocha 2021). Scholars increasingly argued that projectification should be understood not just as a management trend but as a distinct phenomenon, warranting further research. For example Packendorff and Lindgren (2014, p. 7) emphasized that projectification should be examined "not only as a management fad and a structural trajectory in corporate restructuring, but also as a multifaceted phenomenon to be studied in its own right".

Empirical research on projectification has grown significantly in recent decades. Jacobsson and Jałocha (2021) analysed the academic trajectory of projectification studies, identifying that from 1995 to 2009, only 12 academic publications addressed the concept. Whereas between 2010 and 2021, this number increased to 111. This surge in research reflects both an increased interest in project-based organizing and a growing awareness of its implications across different sectors.

2.1.4 Projectification in the Public Sector

The increasing use of projects as a mode of governance and service delivery in the public sector reflects a broader structural and managerial shift in public administration. Projects have become a dominant means of organizing work in government due to their perceived

efficiency, flexibility, agility, and ability to mobilize resources beyond traditional bureaucratic structures (Schoper 2018; Mergel 2024). Unlike traditional hierarchical administration, projects offer public sector organisations a time-bound, goal-oriented approach that aligns with modern expectations for accountability, optimization, and responsiveness (Büttner 2019).

A key driver of projectification in the public sector is the need for resource optimization, particularly in times of budgetary constraints and financial crises. Projects allow governments to control costs while ensuring goal achievement that offers mechanisms to ‘slim down’ the bureaucratic structure while maintaining service delivery efficiency (Jałocha 2024). Furthermore, projects serve as vehicles for external funding, especially in regions where governments rely on European Union structural funds or international grants to finance public sector initiatives (Ettelt, Mays & Allen 2015; Büttner 2019).

Research on the projectification of the public sector has gained traction in the last decade, particularly in policy implementation, public administration, and service delivery. Early studies examined how policy frameworks increasingly relied on projects as governance tools (Jensen, Johansson & Löfström 2017; Öjehag-Pettersson 2017; Bailey, Hodgson & Checkland 2019; Mukhtar-Landgren & Fred 2019). Others analysed how public organizations increasingly operate through project-based structures, largely as a response to New Public Management (NPM) reforms (Abrahamsson & Agevall 2010; Waring & Thomas 2010; Fred & Hall 2017; Fred 2018).

Interestingly, while projectification research in the private sector has been well-documented in project management journals, studies on public sector projectification have predominantly appeared in fields such as public administration, public policy, and governance studies. As noted by Jałocha (2024), this reflects the fact that projectification in government is not merely an extension of project management practices but a core feature of contemporary public management itself. Mergel (2024) explains that this is because project management practice supports modern public administrations and their routine activities, especially agile project management methods.

A notable characteristic of public sector projectification research is its geographical concentration. Jacobsson and Jałocha (2021) found that most studies on public sector projectification have been conducted by Nordic scholars, focusing on European jurisdictions.

This highlights a potential regional bias in the literature, raising the question of whether projectification in other governance contexts (e.g., Anglo-Saxon, Asian, or developing economies) follows the same trajectory.

Finally, Fred (2018, p. 3) asks "What is going on in these organizational settings and does the intensification of project activities change (if at all) the practices of public organizations?".

This raises the critical issue that while much has been written about traditional project management, relatively little is known about how project-based work unfolds in public organizations. This gap directly connects to the central inquiry of this thesis – how public sector project managers negotiate authority, discretion, and governance in the context of projectification.

2.1.5 Projects as Policy Implementation Tools

Beyond financial optimization, projects have become central to public policy experimentation and implementation. Governments often pilot new policies through projects before scaling them to a national or systemic level (Poulsen & Löfgren 2013; Ettelt, Mays & Allen 2015; Bailey, Hodgson & Checkland 2019; Ettelt & Mays 2019). This approach enables policymakers to test and refine interventions before committing to full-scale implementation, ensuring that policies are evidence-based and adaptable (Shiferaw & Klakegg 2012; Mukhtar-Landgren & Fred 2019).

Complex policy interventions often require multiple interconnected projects, leading to large-scale programs that include diverse project types, such as (Bennett & Lemoine 2014):

- Mega-projects and mega-events (large-scale infrastructure or international events)
- Medium and small projects (sector-specific policy interventions)
- ‘Soft’ projects (capacity-building, governance reforms, or social initiatives).

This complexity shapes the role of public sector project managers who must navigate multilayered governance structures while managing projects that often span multiple policy domains (Bennett & Lemoine 2014). Public sector projects are further complicated by ‘wicked problems’; issues so intricate that they require interdisciplinary collaboration, policy pilots, and iterative project cycles to address them (Jałocha 2024). The increasing reliance on

projects for innovation policy and public service modernization has further entrenched projectification in government operations (Ettelt & Mays 2019; Hall 2019).

2.1.6 Public Sector Project Managers: Accidental Experts?

The term ‘accidental project manager’ was first introduced by Pinto and Kharbanda (1995) in response to the rise of projectification reshaping public sector roles. Often requiring government employees to take on project management responsibilities by necessity rather than by choice. They found that most project managers in non-project industries (like the public sector) did not consciously plan to start a career as a project manager. It was a coincidence rather than a formal career plan. For Darrell, Baccarini and Love (2010) this was a result of organizations being forced to implement projects whilst not being ready, or when there are no adequately trained or prepared employees that are called upon to assume project manager roles. Lloyd-Walker, French and Crawford (2016) identified that a key issue in the project management discipline is that many project workers in the private and public sector do not have a project management degree or training when they enter the field which suggests they are recruited to the role due to their technical knowledge, administrative experience, or demonstrated efficiency in organizational activities. Competencies considered more desirable than those of a career project manager.

2.1.7 Power Gaps and the Limitations of Project Manager Authority

While projectification has transformed the public sector’s approach to governance and service delivery, it has also introduced significant challenges. Scholars have raised concerns about power imbalances, organizational tensions, and workforce strain as governments increasingly structure work through projects (Poulsen & Löfgren 2013; Ekstedt 2019). These critiques highlight fundamental tensions between project-based management principles and traditional public sector values, structures, and operational logics.

A major challenge resulting from projectification is the lack of formal authority afforded to project managers within bureaucratic structures. Unlike corporate settings where project managers often hold clear hierarchical authority, public sector project managers frequently operate within diffuse, multi-layered governance environments (Poulsen & Löfgren 2013). This structural limitation results in ‘power gaps’ where project managers lack direct control over resources or decision-making authority. As a result, they must rely on alternative

strategies, such as relationship-building, persuasion, and informal influence to gain respect and drive project progress (Poulsen & Löfgren 2013).

The power gap dilemma has led some public sector organizations to recruit career project managers from the private sector, in search of professionalized project management in response to projectification. However, these private-sector-trained project managers often struggle in government environments due to a lack of experience with the complexities of public administration, regulatory constraints, and political accountability (Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). Unlike private firms, where project success is typically measured in financial returns or market impact, public sector projects must balance political, social, and economic considerations (Boyne 2002). This often requires a level of policy awareness and bureaucratic navigation skills that commercial project managers may not possess (Van Dooren, Bouckaert & Halligan 2015).

2.1.8 Tensions Between Operational Work and Project Work

Projectification has also created structural tensions between ongoing public sector operations and project-based activities. Public sector organizations are not inherently structured as project organizations. They are bureaucratic entities that must balance continuity with the temporary nature of projects (Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). This duality has led to:

- **Role Confusion** – many public servants are required to manage projects while maintaining operational duties, creating unclear role expectations and overlapping responsibilities
- **Overcommitment** – the emphasis on project work often leads to workforce overextension as employees juggle both long-term administrative functions and short-term project deliverables
- **Inefficiencies in Project Integration** –public sector organizations struggle to define themselves as project-oriented. They lack systematic approaches to integrating project and operational requirements, leading to inefficiencies and suboptimal project outcomes.

Boyne (2002) further critiques the assumption that project management methodologies developed in the private sector cannot be seamlessly applied to government contexts. He argues that public sector organizations operate under entirely different logics than private

firms, and as a result, off-the-shelf project management tools require significant adaptation to function effectively in bureaucratic, politically driven environments. Moreover, Borman and Janssen (2013) explain that the initial embedding of commercial project management approaches in government settings, especially Australia, has often been problematic, requiring substantial contextual modifications like the implementation of critical success factors, to align with public accountability structures, citizen engagement processes, and legal constraints prior to making project decisions.

2.1.9 The Competency Trap: Individual vs. Organizational Capability

A prevailing response to projectification in the public sector has been to emphasize the development of individual project manager competencies. Governments have invested heavily in training and certification programs aimed at equipping public servants with formal project management skills (Wagner 2012; Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). However, critics argue that this focus on individual competency development distracts from deeper structural issues.

Blixt and Kirytopoulos (2017) contend that organizational competency, the ability of government institutions to systemically support and manage project-based work, has not kept pace with individual skill development. Without institutional frameworks, policies, and cultural shifts that support project-based work, the burden of managing projectification falls disproportionately on individual project managers, leading to:

- Confusion in project governance structures – many organizations lack clarity on how projects fit within the broader bureaucratic hierarchy
- Misalignment of personal resources – public servants trained in project management often lack the institutional support to apply their skills effectively
- Short-termism – a focus on certification and individual development may obscure long-term organizational transformation efforts needed to embed project-based governance systematically.

2.1.10 Workforce Stress, Burnout, and Employment Risks

Projectification has also introduced significant workforce challenges related to job security and stress. As Bowen et al. (2014) notes, the proliferation of projects has led to widespread burnout and dissatisfaction among construction project management public servants, who

increasingly view project-based work as high-pressure and populated with an abundance of internal and external politics.

One of the key stressors is the mismatch between public service values and project-based performance metrics. Public sector employees, who often enter government work due to commitments to public service ethics and long-term stability, now find themselves in short-term, high-pressure project roles with shifting priorities and uncertain career progression. This dynamic creates professional disillusionment, particularly for those accustomed to long-term policy implementation rather than rapid project cycles (Jałocha 2024). Additionally, project-based employment models shift risk onto individual employees because project workers are expected to take greater personal responsibilities for project outcomes, often in high-stakes environments dictated by stakeholder expectations and demands which can protract project timelines, scope and cost (Ekstedt 2019).

2.1.11 In Summary

Firstly, the common theme throughout this literature is that projectification has proliferated in public sector organisations, and so has scholarly interest. Secondly, project management processes are seen to supplement core public administration functions like policy implementation. Thirdly, the wave of projectification has led to public sector project managers experiencing competency disparities and workforce challenges associated with stress, job insecurity associated with temporary employment, and burnout due to politically demanding environments. Lastly, the majority of this research is based on European jurisdictions. Therefore, research from other jurisdictions is required to broaden the level of inquiry, given that public sectors across the globe are contextually different.

2.2 NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT (NPM), NEW PUBLIC GOVERNANCE (NPG) AND PROJECTIFICATION

Public sector reforms such as New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG) have profoundly shaped how governments operate, often intertwining with projectification. These reforms fundamentally altered how government agencies design, manage, and evaluate projects, leading to the widespread institutionalization of project-based work in public administration (Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). Governance models shifted away from traditional bureaucratic administration toward more flexible, performance-based, and networked approaches, making projects a dominant means of implementing policy (Mukhtar-Landgren & Fred 2019; Ansell & Torfing 2021; Hill & Hupe 2021). This section examines

how these governance shifts have influenced project-based management in the public sector, leading to an increasing reliance on projects as tools for service delivery, policy experimentation, and administrative reform.

2.2.1 New Public Management and the Projectization of Government

New Public Management (NPM) emerged in the 1980s as a response to perceived inefficiencies in traditional bureaucratic governance (Hood 1991; Halligan 1997). This approach borrowed heavily from private sector financial and management practices, shifting the focus of public administration from hierarchical control towards performance measurement, efficiency, and market-driven principles. Under NPM, projects became an ideal instrument for delivering government policies because of their time-bound nature, clear performance objectives, and delegation of responsibility (Poulsen & Löfgren 2013).

Blixt and Kirytopoulos (2017) argue that just as commercial enterprises implement change through projects, government agencies have increasingly adopted project-based models to implement policy initiatives, infrastructure development, and service delivery reforms. This alignment between project work and NPM's emphasis on results-based accountability has led to the projectification of public administration. As Picciotto (2020, p. 474) observes:

“The NPM movement rests on the theoretical pillars of neoliberal economics, transaction cost analysis, principal-agent theory and public choice doctrines. Current project management models focused on achieving intended results are animated by the same ideas.”

Therefore, dominant project management methodologies, particularly those emphasizing control, risk management, and performance measurement, are deeply influenced by NPM principles. This has created an environment where public servants are expected to adopt managerialist approaches, with a greater emphasis on efficiency, competition, and quantifiable outcomes (Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017).

The increasing role of projectification in governance has also reshaped bureaucratic structures, leading to a proliferation of temporary project organizations within public administration. Godenhjelm (2016, p. 35) notes that one of the most significant changes introduced by governance reforms has been the rise of project-based structures in government:

“The most significant changes brought on by an increasing use of new governance mechanisms is the proliferation of project organizations.”

This shift suggests that projects are not simply administrative tools, but a structural response to the demands of modern governance.

2.2.2 Challenges in Project-Based Public Service Delivery

A key tension introduced by NPM is which actors should deliver public value. Unlike traditional bureaucratic models, where governments directly manage and implement projects, NPM reforms have encouraged outsourcing, public-private partnerships, and contractor-based service delivery models (Kassel & Berman 2010). In this model, governments act as project sponsors, rather than direct implementers, creating a complex system of contractual oversight and accountability management. This shift has introduced key challenges:

- Public-private misalignment – private contractors operate under different incentives than government agencies, creating potential misalignment between market-driven goals and public service objectives (Bovaird, Löffler & Loeffler 2003)
- Competency gaps – the diffusion of responsibility between public and private actors necessitates robust training programs to align project management competencies across government staff and external contractors (De Graaf 2005)
- Heightened accountability pressures – public managers must enforce transparency and public value creation while navigating private-sector performance models, requiring a complex balance of financial, legal, and ethical considerations (Carter, Day & Klein 2002).

Blixt and Kirytopoulos (2017) argue that to ensure the successful implementation of project-based governance, governments must invest in competency frameworks that align decision-making processes across public and private project actors. As well as training programs to ensure that project sponsors understand both managerial responsibilities and public sector values.

While NPM’s focus on outcome-driven project management has improved efficiency, it has also introduced challenges related to risk management, financial oversight, and political accountability. As Hall, Holt and Purchase (2003, p. 495) observe, modern procurement

methods have placed increased emphasis on “the understanding that financial aspects of projects are influenced by the good management of risk”. Therefore, the implementation of NPM through project-based governance structures requires a careful balancing act between flexibility, financial discipline, and democratic accountability (Teisman & van Buuren 2007).

The considerable historical development of projectification in both the public and private sector settings is the contextual background to project organisations and project management. Projects in the public sector often imply innovation and organizational change (Fred 2018). The practices of projects rely on ideals of detailed planning, reporting procedures and control. These ideals, or characteristics, of project practice have been inherited from areas such as engineering and technology, and the US military and space programs of the 1950s and 60s.

Accordingly, there is an extensive body of research supporting the aim to build ‘better’ and more efficient project organizations through models and standards like ISO, PERT or PMBoK. This is sometimes referred to as the traditional perspective on projects, based on a prescribed set of tools and techniques, and predicated on a definition of project success as being on time, on budget and to specification (Whittaker 1999; Wysocki 2011, p. 42). The traditional perspective has been criticized, particularly on the part of critical management scholars, who argue that the research has tried to provide “*recipes and handbooks on how to manage better*” (Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm 2002, p. 12); (see also Hodgson & Cicmil 2006b, 2006a; Kenis, Janowicz & Cambré 2009).

This line of research adopts a prescriptive character and some scholars oppose the largely atheoretical and apolitical quest for improved efficiency and the rush to build “better” organisations and educate “better” managers (Clegg, Phillips & Courpasson 2006, p. 266; Morgan & Spicer 2009). Criticism has focused on project processes lack of sufficient conception of power and conviction through being generalist in nature (Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm 2002; Clegg, Phillips & Courpasson 2006; Hodgson & Cicmil 2007, 2008; Morris, Pinto & Soderlund 2012).

Some critics argue that the traditional perspective whereby project management processes control and deliver projects end-to-end does not simply not represent the way projects are actually managed, manifested, or function in practice (Whittaker 1999; Lindgren & Packendorff 2003; Ivory et al. 2006). One core argument from the critical perspective, inspired by organizational theorists, is that projects cannot be isolated from their

environments as project management processes are ancillary to organisational contexts, not the other way around. Therefore, they should be viewed as temporary organisations embedded in specific contexts, and these contexts matter for what happens in projects, how it happens and why (Lundin & Söderholm 1995; Grabher 2002; Sydow & Staber 2002; Bakker 2010).

Boyne (2002) argues that the government extension to PMBoK is still largely a process and technically focused project management standard for the public sector and offers little guidance in contextual or behavioural areas. Clarke (2010) and Kassel and Berman (2010) are among those that support the view that a tailored, technical focus alone is not enough to successfully delivery projects in a public-sector environment. They stress that public projects must deliver more than products or services but also public value, which is defined as “supporting the public interest, values and ethics, as well as the stewardship of public funds” (Kassel & Berman 2010, p.3). Young et al. (2012) and Young and Grant (2015) identified in Australian case studies addressing the New South Wales and Victoria public sectors, that standardised project management processes did not deliver or enable the realisation of public sector strategy, giving rise to large systemic deficiencies between best practice public sector application.

2.2.3 From NPM to NPG: The Shift Towards Collaborative Governance and Projectification

NPG represents a shift away from NPM’s market-driven, performance-oriented approach, emphasizing collaborative, cross-sectoral engagement in policy design and implementation (Hill & Hupe 2021). Osborne (2006, p. 9) describes a “transitory stage” between traditional public administration and NPG:

“Both a product and a response to the increasingly complex, plural, and fragmented nature of public policy implementation and service delivery in the twenty-first century”.

Governance reforms have progressively shifted more towards network-based, participatory, and decentralized models that significantly influence how public services are delivered opposed to being centrally controlled by a minority (Meier 2019). Unlike NPM, which sought to improve bureaucratic efficiency by integrating private sector management tools, NPG redefines governance itself as a cooperative and interactive process involving multiple actors from government, private industry, and civil society (Krogh & Triantafillou 2024).

This shift toward horizontal governance structures has profound implications for projectification. Since NPG promotes collaborative decision-making and decentralized authority, projects have become critical mechanisms for implementing governance reforms, enabling governments to engage diverse stakeholders in flexible, goal-oriented initiatives (Ansell & Torfing 2021). Unlike NPM, which relied on managerial control and market competition to drive efficiency, NPG:

- Encourages stakeholder involvement through network governance and participatory decision-making (Krogh & Triantafillou 2024)
- Emphasizes shared-power arrangements rather than rigid hierarchical structures (Ladner, Sager & Sørensen 2022)
- Relies on inter-organizational collaboration to address policy challenges that cannot be managed by government alone (McMullin 2021).

This collaborative transition to governing has accelerated the proliferation of project-based work in the public sector because as public tasks and governance challenges grow more complex, public organizations increasingly adopt matrix structures, in which multidisciplinary teams work across departments and agencies to manage cross-cutting initiatives (Krogh & Triantafillou 2024). NPG reforms demand that project teams integrate diverse professional expertise, policy standards, and operational norms to ensure effective policy implementation to reflect multiple social perspectives and agendas (Hill & Hupe 2021). Projects have therefore become not just a method of service delivery, but a fundamental component of governance innovation, allowing for greater responsiveness, adaptability, and inter-agency coordination (Godenhjelm 2016).

2.2.4 Projectification as a Mechanism for Institutional Adaptation

The shift toward collaborative governance under NPG has introduced new institutional norms that influence how project-based governance is structured and implemented. These include:

- **Problem-Driven Stakeholder Engagement** – governance actors are increasingly expected to design projects based on the needs of specific policy challenges, determining which stakeholders should be involved and how they should collaborate (Ansell & Torfing 2021)

- **Service-Dominant Logic in Public Administration** – there has been a transition from product-focused bureaucratic models to a public service logic, in which governance structures prioritize continuous innovation, citizen engagement, and dynamic policy adaptation (Osborne 2018)
- **Developmental Evaluation for Policy Innovation** – governments increasingly use iterative, experimental project cycles to test policy initiatives, adapting strategies based on real-time evaluation and stakeholder feedback (Patton, McKegg & Wehipeihana 2015).

The interaction between NPG's reform tools, emerging collaborative management practices, and evolving governance norms suggests that projectification is not merely an administrative strategy but a means of institutional transformation (Krogh & Triantafillou 2024). Krogh and Triantafillou (2024) further explain that NPG's reliance on project-based and ad hoc governance mechanisms contributes to the long-term restructuring of government functions. Temporary project-based collaborations often become institutionalized as governance models evolve, meaning that project work shapes not only service delivery but also how governments organize themselves over time.

Deprojectification is the decreased use and deinstitutionalization of projects in organizations, society, or parts thereof and is a shift away from the implementation, or use of, some or all key elements inherent in a project way of working that focuses on business transformation towards more stability (Jacobsson & Jałocha 2025). Moreover, some organizations are initially established as projects and subsequently undergo deprojectification to continue operations without projects, as this allows for greater efficiency and predictability (Bogacz-Wojtanowska & Jałocha 2016).

2.2.5 Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) as a Tool of NPG

One of the key aspects of post-NPM governance is the increasing reliance on Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) where public sector agencies and private sector entities unify to deliver complex social projects. Greve and Hodge (2010, p. 150) argue that PPPs are now part of a larger governance paradigm, enabling “governments to engage with a number of private agents in often complex and contractually sophisticated relationships”. PPPs are a tool of NPG, allowing public sector agencies to:

- Activate private sector actors for infrastructure development and service delivery (Casady et al. 2020)
- Orchestrate multi-stakeholder collaboration across the project lifecycle (Verweij & Satheesh 2023)
- Use contractual mechanisms to regulate incentives and ensure cooperative behaviour (Wang & Wang 2023).

Because PPPs involve long-term commitments and interdependencies, they exemplify NPG's emphasis on trust-based governance. Effective partnerships depend on strong relational networks, mutual accountability, and collaborative problem-solving, rather than just financial transactions (Casady et al. 2020; Hu et al. 2021).

2.2.6 Trust as a Core Element of NPG-Based Projectification

Given NPG's emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration, trust plays a central role in project governance. In the context of NPG, trust is defined as:

“A disposition and attitude concerning the willingness to rely upon the actions of or be vulnerable towards another party, under circumstances of contractual and social obligations, with the potential for collaboration” (Edkins & Smyth 2006, p. 84).

Casady et al. (2020) highlight that successful governance reforms require trust-building mechanisms between governments, private partners, and civil society actors. Trust, therefore, is a structural component of project-based governance under NPG, shaping how partnerships are formed, how contracts are managed, and how stakeholders coordinate efforts over time. This aligns with Hall (2002, p. 23) who argues that “governance and capacity are intimately connected and that an innovative, simultaneous blending of public management and civic capacities is needed to build trust and govern effectively under new and challenging conditions”.

2.2.7 Interaction Between Projectification and Public Sector Reforms

The intersection of New Public Management (NPM), New Public Governance (NPG), and the increased use of project-based work has shaped contemporary public administration in layered and often contradictory ways. Rather than fully replacing one another, these governance paradigms coexist and interact dynamically, influencing how projects are

designed, managed, and institutionalized in the public sector. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017, p. 8) describe this process as a form of “geological sedimentation”, where “new layers overlie, but do not replace or completely wash away the previous layer.”

This layering effect allows for multiple, sometimes competing, logics of public management to persist simultaneously, leading to hybrid governance structures that blend bureaucratic control, market efficiency, and collaborative problem-solving approaches. Reforms do not replace one another over time (Greve et al. 2020). Rather, new reform elements supplement existing ones through this layering process (Streeck & Thelen 2005; Mahoney & Thelen 2009).

Godenhjelm (2016, p. 35) observes that project- based structures are one of “*the most significant changes brought on by an increasing use of new governance mechanisms is the proliferation of project organizations*”.

As such, projectification serves as both a tool and a byproduct of public sector reforms, embedding project-based logics into governance structures while adapting to the institutional tensions between NPM and NPG principles.

2.2.8 Projectification as a Hybrid Governance Mechanism

As Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017, p. 27), argue, governance tools such as Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) do not belong exclusively to either NPM or NPG paradigms but instead function across both. This suggests that project-based governance mechanisms can serve multiple reform agendas simultaneously, adapting to different institutional logics depending on their context of application. For instance, PPPs can:

1. Align with NPM principles when used to engage private contractors in public procurement for economic efficiency, positioning projects as cost-effective solutions for infrastructure development (Greve & Hodge 2010)
2. Align with NPG principles when deployed as cross-sector collaborative initiatives, partnering with social enterprises and civil society to address complex societal challenges (“wicked problems”) in innovative ways (Krogh & Thygesen 2022)

This dual role of projects highlights their adaptive function within evolving governance models. Whether structured around contractual efficiency (NPM) or participatory

collaboration (NPG), project-based management remains a core implementation tool for contemporary public sector reforms.

2.2.9 In summary

Given the layered nature of governance transformations, modern projectification can be understood as a response to bureaucratic rigidity. Under both NPM and NPG, projects serve as flexible alternatives to traditional bureaucratic processes, allowing public agencies to pursue policy innovation, inter-agency collaboration, and time-bound initiatives. They are also an enabler of policy experimentation. The temporary nature of projects aligns with NPG's emphasis on adaptive governance, where governments test and refine policy initiatives through experimental, iterative approaches.

A structural feature of modern governance, projects were once considered exceptional, ad hoc interventions. But they have now become institutionalized as a dominant mechanism for organizing public administration. Contemporary public sector organisations deliver projects that are reactive in response to major social challenges like child obesity, pandemics and environmental protection which are not necessarily output driven by cost, schedule and quality. Public sector organisations utilise projects but not necessarily project processes as means of pivoting in response to social needs and crisis. This hybrid role of projectification highlights its significance in public governance, serving as both an agent of reform and an evolving governance paradigm in its own right.

2.3 THE HISTORY OF THE PROJECTIFICATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SECTOR

The Australian public sector has undergone significant transformation because of projectification. The adoption of project-based structures has been closely tied to NPM principles, particularly in efforts to enhance financial accountability, streamline service delivery, and improve administrative efficiency (Young et al. 2012). This section examines the historical trajectory of projectification in Australia, focusing on its policy origins, financial governance role, structural impact, and the evolving competency requirements for public sector project managers.

2.3.1 Federal and State Government-Led Projectification

Projectification in the Australian public sector first gained momentum in the 1990s as part of broader NPM-inspired governance reforms. The introduction of project management

methodologies was primarily federally and state-led, aligning with a political ideology that emphasized efficiency, market-driven reforms, and outsourcing (Young & Grant 2015).

Armstrong (1998) traces this shift back to 1996, when the Liberal National Coalition Government implemented business-oriented management practices across Federal and State Governments, integrating project management methodologies into public administration. These reforms aligned with NPM's core tenets, emphasizing:

- **Financial efficiency** – reducing public sector expenditure through improved management practices
- **Service streamlining** – implementing time-bound, performance-driven projects to deliver government services
- **Outsourcing** – engaging private contractors and external stakeholders in project delivery.

Johnston (2000) describes how this shift marked a departure from traditional public service stewardship, embedding project management as a standard approach to policy implementation and program management. The adoption of project-based frameworks has since become a structural feature of public administration in Australia, shaping governance at both federal and state levels (Young et al. 2012).

2.3.2 Projectification as a Mechanism for Financial Governance

Project management processes have played a pivotal role in financial governance within the Australian public sector, particularly in the coordination of funding, grants, and strategic financial planning. As a central mechanism for financial accountability and program oversight, this move was rooted in the belief that projects offered a structured and measurable means of resource allocation. Also that government initiatives should align with budget constraints, have clear deliverables and outcomes, and enhanced financial transparency and fiscal discipline (Steane 2008).

Johnston (2000) highlighted that projectification was formalized into a sector-wide strategic management system, integrating project-based decision-making into:

- **Corporate planning** – using project methodologies to define long-term government strategies

- **Program budgeting** – allocating funding based on project cycles rather than ongoing administrative processes
- **Resource allocation** – directing financial resources toward time-limited, performance-driven initiatives
- **Implementation and evaluation** – subjecting projects to continuous review and strategic assessment.

A key factor reinforcing this financial governance model was the constitutional power of the Commonwealth Government to control the allocation of grant funds to the states. Under Australia's Constitution, federal grants can be 'tied' to specific projects, allowing the Commonwealth to dictate how funds are spent at the state level (Steane 2008). As a result, state governments were mandated to integrate project management practices to access federal funding (Armstrong 1998; Steane 2008).

2.3.3 Structural and Bureaucratic Adjustments

While NPM reforms introduced project-based structures into Australian public administration, they did not fully replace bureaucratic processes. Instead, project management was layered onto existing governance frameworks, leading to a hybrid model of traditional administration and project-based management.

Armstrong (1998) highlighted Victoria's early adoption of project management processes as part of the Management Improvement Initiative, aimed at restructuring service delivery, financial management, asset management, and human resource administration through project methodologies. These reforms were implemented through project-based structures, effectively using project management to micromanage the rollout of administrative changes across state agencies. Other Australian states soon followed Victoria's example, embedding project methodologies into government reform agendas (Armstrong 1998).

However, long-term studies identified several challenges associated with this bureaucratic transformation. Young et al. (2012) found that prescriptive project management guidelines, introduced in Victoria's early reforms, often failed to align with broader strategic goals. The rigid accountability structures imposed on project teams limited their ability to adapt to evolving policy environments, ultimately contributing to poor project outcomes and strategic misalignment.

Steane (2008) suggested that future research should focus on how trust, regulatory adjustments, and decentralized governance models can improve project-based administration. This raises critical questions about how governance structures should evolve to support both efficiency-driven project management and adaptive decision-making at the local level.

No different to other public sector organisations, the Australian public sector initiated projects that only government can champion. These projects were complex, unique, and not tailor made to prescriptive project management processes that are associated with cost, time and quality and thus processes are adapted (Bayraktarov et al. 2016; Kennedy et al. 2021).

The Australian Snakebite Project, utilised the word ‘project’ to display Government’s commitment to the issue of addressing snakebite whilst not utilising project management processes (Johnston et al. 2017). The Primary Producer Knowledge Network project which was a mental health awareness project resulted in the project team making broad adaptations to project management procedures to tailor deliverables to mental health outcomes (Kennedy et al. 2021). The “It’s Your Move!” project nationally targeted reduction in overweight and obesity in Australian families which was delivered through adopting flexible approaches to obesity prevention that were cost and time effective, equitable, sustainable, opposed to project management processes to meet targets (Millar et al. 2011). Project management processes failed to report the success of Australian marine coastal restoration projects because they are output based and did not account for the long-term nature of ecological project survival rates as projects were closed immediately on completion (Bayraktarov et al. 2016).

In response to COVID-19, the Australian Federal Government shifted many services to remote service delivery via reactive projects for continuity of services. This resulted in unplanned technology projects that equipped public servants for provisioning remote telehealth services and initiating service projects that responded to issues such as increased domestic violence (Carrington et al. 2021; Taylor et al. 2021).

These examples demonstrate that in the context of the Australian public service, project management processes do not fully support public sector project delivery and therefore, the public service has found other ways of delivering projects as they have realised that project management processes are not their saving grace.

2.3.4 Challenges and Competencies for Project Managers in the Australian Public Service

Despite decades of projectification, Australian public sector projects continue to face delivery challenges, with competency gaps in project management identified as a key issue. Blixt and Kirytopoulos (2017) highlight that Australian public sector projects have consistently failed to meet delivery expectations, despite more than \$100 billion in investment over the past decade. Similarly, Young et al. (2012) and Young and Grant (2015) report that many government projects fall short of expected outcomes, raising concerns about the effectiveness of project governance models and competency levels of public sector project managers. This brings into question the ability of government agencies to integrate project methodologies with public administration frameworks.

To address these challenges, the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) initiated reforms in 2014 aimed at improving public sector project management capacity, including:

1. Introducing project management as a core leadership skill – ensuring that senior public servants were trained in project-based decision-making.
2. Developing a national vocational education qualification framework – implementing the BSB41513 Certificate IV in Project Management Practice to standardize competencies across government agencies (Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017).

Despite these efforts, recruitment challenges remain. The APS has sought to attract private sector project managers to strengthen government project teams (Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). However, Boyne (2002) cautions that private-sector-trained project managers often struggle in public administration because of complex government regulations and compliance requirements, the need to navigate political influences and stakeholder engagement, and the differing definitions of success between commercial and public sector projects. These findings suggest that building public sector project management capacity requires more than training; it necessitates institutional reforms that align project governance with public administration realities.

2.3.5 In summary

The Australian Government first implemented project management processes in the mid-1990s when project management scholars first started covering the topic of projectification in the private sector. NPM reforms associated with cost control were the driver for public sector

organisations implementing project management processes. In doing so, this unlocked grant money. The mid-1990s marks a timestamp of when public sector organisations in Australia first started utilising project management processes. This is important because in contemporary public administration literature and this thesis, a lot has changed since.

More recently, the literature identifies certain areas of society that only governments can undertake projects for which project management processes cannot cater for like projects to reduce obesity, deal with the mental health of farmers, improve natural areas and respond to crisis such as COVID-19. However, the buzz word of ‘project’ seems to carry weight in symbolising to the public that action is being taken in response to a pandemic, health issue or climate change issue over a specific period of time.

Project management processes provision large amounts of processes for planning and portfolio management and stakeholder management, however, it is impossible for public sector organisations to plan and consult stakeholders in the midst of a cyclone or a tornado. Public sector organisations are tasked with commissioning projects during or immediately after the fact which project management processes do not account for. Lastly, public servants that know the internal context and conditions of public sector organisations seem to thrive when stepping into project management roles and sustain longer periods of employment than those with private sector project management experience.

2.4 THE THREE LEVELS OF PUBLIC SECTOR PROJECTIFICATION

Projectification operates at multiple levels, influencing individuals, organizations, and society as a whole (Jacobsen 2022). Understanding the differences at each allows for a more nuanced analysis of how project-based work reshapes governance structures, professional identities, and macro-level institutional arrangements.

Kuura (2011) categorizes three levels of public sector projectification:

- **Personal Projectification** – a shift in individual work relations and/or private life, increasing the primacy of project-based work
- **Organizational Projectification** – a transformation in organizational and governance structures, prioritizing project-based processes within central organizations and supply networks

- **Societal Projectification** – a shift in governance structures at a macro level, where project-based governance mechanisms become dominant across society.

Each of these levels has distinct characteristics and implications for public sector institutions, shaping how governments deliver services, allocate funding, and define professional competencies.

2.4.1 Personal Level

At the individual level, projectification affects how people experience work, define their professional identities, and make sense of their roles in organizations.

1. Projectified Time and Space

Projectification has altered temporal and spatial dimensions of work, leading to more flexible yet unpredictable work environments. Unlike traditional bureaucratic roles with fixed schedules and stable workplaces, project-based work demands:

- Increased adaptability in work hours and locations (Ekstedt 2019)
- Compressed timelines and performance pressures, disrupting long-term career stability (Dollinger 2023)
- ‘Time-stretching’ and ‘time-tricking’ – strategies where workers manipulate project schedules to prolong engagement or manage workload fluctuations to avoid returning to routine work and permanent structures (Hubmann 2021; Virtová & Vostal 2021).

Project work also reconfigures the nature of professional relationships. Virtová and Vostal (2021) found that increased projectification reduces workplace presence, as workers shift toward remote collaboration and digital workspaces, weakening face-to-face interactions with colleagues and stakeholders.

2. Projectified Professions and Identity

Projectification has reshaped how individuals perceive their professional status. It has:

- Created new professional identities, with individuals increasingly defining themselves as ‘project specialists’ or ‘projectocrats’ (Fowler, Lindahl & Sköld 2015; Jałocha 2016)

- Increased the demand for new skill sets, requiring adaptive learning and multidisciplinary competencies to achieve policy outcomes and targets within finite periods (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015; Jensen, Johansson & Löfström 2018)
- Favoured masculine work cultures, reinforcing traditional gender biases in project-based professions (Edström & Brunila 2016).

Jensen, Thuesen and Geraldi (2016) argue that project experience is based on diversity rather than repetition. Working on multiple projects across different contexts is seen as more valuable than long-term specialization in a single role. Olausson and Svensson (2019) highlight that projectification has enabled public administrators to function as political entrepreneurs, using projects as vehicles for policy change.

3. Projectified Understanding of Work

Projectification does not only change work structures but also how individuals interpret and talk about their work. The language and framing of work itself have shifted, embedding project logic into everyday professional discourse (Fred 2015). Key shifts include:

- Replacing traditional bureaucratic terminology with project-based vocabulary, reinforcing a delivery-oriented work culture (Fred 2020)
- Redefining professional expertise – experience is no longer tied to institutional knowledge, but to an individual's ability to be agile in regards to project-based problem-solving (Jensen, Thuesen & Geraldi 2016)
- Blurring the distinction between operations and projects, creating tensions between permanent staff and project workers (Ekstedt 2019).

Fred (2020) found that projectification in the Swedish public sector led to a shift from multiple coexisting institutional logics to a dominant 'project logic' that alters how employees perceive their roles within organizations.

2.4.2 Organisational Level

At the organizational level, projectification reshapes how institutions structure themselves, secure funding, and govern public services.

1. Projectified Structures

Public sector organizations increasingly function as hybrid entities, blending traditional bureaucratic governance with project-based operational models. Fred (2015) found that project characteristics ‘creep’ into permanent organizations, creating environments where bureaucratic frameworks are replaced by temporary structures embedded within permanent ones (Fred & Hall 2017). For example Nesheim (2020) found that Norwegian public agencies integrate projects into core organizational functions, balancing project and non-project work. While Jalocho (2019) found that in the Polish context massive European Union funding accelerated projectification, reorienting public administration toward a project-based model.

2. Project Funding and Innovation

Public sector organizations increasingly rely on external project funding, shaping what services and programs they prioritize (Jacobsen 2022). This dependence can:

- Shift organizational priorities toward funding availability, rather than strategic goals (Hodge & Adams 2016)
- Weaken local autonomy, as governments align policies to fit donor requirements (Mukhtar-Landgren 2021)
- Create project fatigue, where organizations constantly initiate new projects to maintain financial support (Fred 2020).

Studies show that project-based funding often leads to incomplete implementation, where projects fail to become permanent institutional practices once funding ends and outcomes or products operationally transition into the permanent organisational structure (Abrahamsson & Agevall 2009; Meinert & Whyte 2014).

3. Projectified Governance

Projectification has introduced a new governance paradigm, where projects serve as primary mechanisms of administrative control (Edström & Brunila 2016). This model creates:

- Accountability gaps, as project governance bypasses traditional bureaucratic oversight mechanisms (Munck Af Rosenschöld & Wolf 2017)

- Adaptive governance challenges, requiring new models that integrate flexibility with regulatory stability (Hodge & Adams 2016).

Fred and Hall (2017) argue that project-based work is not a break from bureaucracy, but a reformulation of it, embedding project logic within administrative structures.

2.4.3 Societal Level

At a societal level, projectification influences policy making, governance models, and economic structures.

1. Policy and Public Governance

Governments increasingly use projects as vehicles for policy implementation, allowing for:

- Decentralized responsibility, where national governments delegate policy execution to local agencies and external stakeholders (Hodgson et al. 2019)
- Flexible governance structures, shifting from traditional bureaucratic administration to networked, project-based governance (Munck Af Rosenschöld & Wolf 2017).

However, critics warn that collaboration can be difficult to achieve in project environments despite good intentions and thus, projectification can create policy fragmentation and weaken long-term institutional stability as projects may not be aligned with current societal needs (Jensen, Johansson & Löfström 2018).

2. Economic Impact of Projectification

Projects are increasingly seen as drivers of economic growth, influencing:

- National labour markets, as project-based employment expands across sectors (Jałocha 2019)
- Public sector financing, where governments use project-based funding to manage economic development (Schoper 2018).

Cicmil and O'Laocha (2016, p. 558) caution that project funding structures may create “a tyranny of target deadlines and efficiency-obsessed systems of measurement and evaluation

of outcomes” limiting the flexibility needed for addressing complex societal issues as a result funding bodies implementing output-based performance criteria.

2.4.4 In summary

The personal level of projectification literature indicates that public servants in project management roles are trapped in a somewhat ‘projectified life’ that is dynamic, full of novelty, complex, bound by time, uncertainty and excitement. Projectification at the organisational level indicates that public sector organisations utilise project management processes as a means of acquiring grant funding. A key issue of this is that funds may be acquired for projects that do not meet policy or strategy and may be prolonged through successive election cycles where elected party visions constantly change each cycle. Projects may not reflect what a party has been voted in to do. This issue is identified at the societal level of projectification which highlights that governments and bureaucrats will attempt to acquire funding for initiatives that do not attribute to policy.

2.5 AUTHORITY, AUTONOMY, AND EMERGING FRAMEWORKS IN PUBLIC SECTOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Public sector project managers must navigate tensions between centralized control and the need for autonomy to simultaneously uphold bureaucratic principles whilst having the flexibility to deliver projects. This includes the balancing of political, social, bureaucratic, and managerial expectations (Nyadera & Islam 2023). The literature highlights three key themes in understanding authority and autonomy within projectified public administration:

1. The tension between bureaucracy and discretion, where project managers must balance compliance with governance frameworks while maintaining strategic flexibility (Clegg & Courpasson 2004)
2. The political influences on projectification, which frame projects as tools for political strategy, governance reform, and public accountability (Volden & Welde 2022)
3. Conceptualizing authority and autonomy, drawing on philosophical perspectives in project management, as called for by Konstantinou and Müller (2016), to explain how project managers operate within structured yet unpredictable governance environments.

These dynamics have significant implications for policy implementation, managerial discretion, and the evolving role of public sector project managers.

2.5.1 The Tension Between Bureaucracy and Discretion

Governance reforms have sought to reconcile efficiency-driven control mechanisms with the need for local managerial discretion. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) describe how decades of NPM-inspired efficiency reforms have now given way to cooperation and co-creation approaches (Ansell & Gash 2008; Sørensen & Torfing 2011; Lægreid & Rykkja 2015). However, Karlsson (2019) notes that, despite NPM's declining academic relevance, its institutional legacy continues to shape public sector structures and managerial behaviours.

The literature on street-level bureaucracy has long emphasized the importance of discretion, especially in the domain of policy implementation (Brodkin 1997; Sandfort 2000; Tummers & Bekkers 2014). Lipsky (2010) argues that empowering bureaucrats with greater discretion enhances policy effectiveness by allowing them to interpret and adapt policies in response to contextual realities.

Research on street-level bureaucracy in public administration has increased since Michael Lipsky published his seminal book on the topic in 1980. The number of published studies has grown steadily over time, especially in the 2000s when scholars began to question the impossibility of public managers and their officers relying on processes to solely execute public services (Chang & Brewer 2023). Within this accumulating body of literature, some focal points have emerged: some scholars investigated the discretion of street-level bureaucrats as agents of the state (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2022); other scholars concentrated on how street-level bureaucrats implement policies and influence organizational outcomes (Brewer 2005; May & Winter 2009). Studies also probed the inner-world of street-level bureaucrats, often depicting them as well-meaning employees who cope with dilemmas and make on-the-spot decisions shaped by their challenging work environment and close proximity to clients (Brodkin 2011).

Karlsson (2019) introduced the concept of 'brave management', where managers exercise discretion by resisting hierarchical controls, acting as independent decision-makers rather than rigid policy enforcers. He draws on Rotter (1966) locus of control theory, which differentiates between:

- High-discretion managers ("brave") – Those who challenge bureaucratic constraints and push policy through managerial controls (Lipsky 2010)
- Low-discretion managers ("obedient") – Those who comply strictly with governance frameworks, potentially leading to policy alienation and inefficiency (Tummers 2012).

Jałocha (2024) observes that public sector project managers build informal authority based on their technical expertise, negotiating between accountability requirements and the need for managerial flexibility. This duality creates a balancing act where project managers must navigate:

- Political oversight and managerial discretion
- Bureaucratic rules and adaptive problem-solving
- Strategic autonomy and institutional compliance. The extent to which project managers can assert discretion within structured governance systems remains a central tension in public sector projectification.

2.5.2 Political Influences on Projectification

Projectification positioning projects as mechanisms for delivering policy commitments and demonstrating political action (Sjöblom, Löfgren & Godenhjelm 2013). Projects allow public administration to shift from routinized bureaucratic procedures to targeted, goal-oriented initiatives, reinforcing political agendas (Sjöblom, Löfgren & Godenhjelm 2013) Fred and Hall (2017) argue that projects are often used to accelerate decision-making and improve problem-solving capabilities by assembling stakeholders, expertise, and vested interests on a just-in-time basis. While project-based governance reshapes accountability structures within public administration. As Rose (1999) and Ypi (2016) both emphasise, public administrators increasingly have to assume personal accountability for political project outcomes, performance metrics tied to political expectations, and must operate within governance frameworks that emphasize short-term deliverables over long-term institutional development because projects are essential to political actors actively ruling. This transformation blurs traditional lines of bureaucratic responsibility and hierarchy, placing project managers at the centre of politically driven governance mechanisms that are normally dealt with by executives (Courpasson & Clegg 2006).

Jansson (2011) argues that projectification is not purely a managerial phenomenon but also a political strategy for demonstrating change, innovation, and responsiveness. However, if projects are perceived as technocratic solutions rather than political priorities, they risk becoming isolated efforts with limited long-term impact (Jansson 2011; Lindgren & Jansson 2013). While Fred and Hall (2017) describe how social investment funds illustrate this dynamic, as projectification is increasingly used to address high-profile issues such as homelessness and youth unemployment. The integration of projects into overarching policy strategies is crucial for ensuring sustained impact beyond short-term political cycles.

2.5.3 Conceptualizing Authority and Autonomy in Project Work

To understand how project managers exercise authority within structured yet fluid governance systems, the works of Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt offer philosophical insights into autonomy, decision-making, and political action.

1. Derrida: Deconstruction, Judgment, and Transformation

Derrida's work emphasizes the contingency of authority and the necessity of judgment in uncertain conditions. Blair (2007, p. 149) argues that Derrida's political philosophy is not merely about critique but about the transformation of pre-existing structures, stating:

"A political work is ... the transformation of what is."

Beardsworth (2013) expands on this, describing how political decision-making occurs within aporia: a space of irreducible uncertainty where actors must make contingent, yet necessary, choices. This mirrors the discretionary role of project managers, who operate within structured constraints yet retain agency to shape governance outcomes.

2. Arendt: Freedom, Action, and Unscripted Judgment

Arendt (2007) conceptualizes freedom as inherently political, tied to spontaneous action and judgment rather than mere autonomy. She states:

“What is crucial for us here is to understand freedom itself as political ... and to realize that coercion and brute force are always a means for protecting or expanding political space, but in and of themselves are definitely not political” (Arendt 2007, p. 108).

In this view, public sector project managers embody political action, as they:

- Interpret policies and translate them into projects
- Exercise discretion in navigating bureaucratic constraints
- Make unscripted decisions that shape governance in real time.

Both Derrida and Arendt emphasize that political agency is defined by the capacity to act within uncertainty. This positioning aligns with the discretionary challenges of public sector projectification.

2.6 CONCLUSION: SETTING UP THE RESEARCH DESIGN CHAPTER

The literature reviewed in this chapter has identified several key tensions shaping public sector projectification:

- Project managers operate within structured governance frameworks yet require discretion to navigate complex challenges that reactively affect their public sector organisations
- Projects serve as tools for strategic governance and political action, reinforcing accountability pressures
- Reforms and project management processes overlay one another creating what is perceived to be a heavily red-taped environment
- Project management processes are identified to be not completely fit-for-purpose to public sector challenges related to meeting societal needs in the coalface of unpredictable situations.

These dynamics raise critical research questions about how project managers assert authority, exercise discretion, and navigate governance constraints. The following research design chapter will outline the methodological approach used to investigate these questions, detailing:

- How public sector project managers negotiate autonomy and compliance in their work
- The strategies they use to assert authority within structured governance frameworks
- How projectification shapes decision-making processes within public administration.

By situating projectification within philosophical, political, and governance frameworks, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how project-based work is transforming public sector management.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides additional context for the research framework applied throughout the thesis, culminating in two published research papers and a conceptual paper (Chapters 4 to 6). While methodological details specific to each study are contained within the individual chapters, this chapter offers a complementary overview of the overall research philosophy. It discusses the research paradigm and its relationship to the research questions, presents the key research question guiding the study, and explains the overarching theoretical framework used to address that question.

This research design follows the Saunders-style research onion Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019, p. 108) as depicted in Figure 1. It displays how each methodological layer is aligned with the thesis' overarching inquiry into how discretion is practised and understood by project managers within projectified environments.

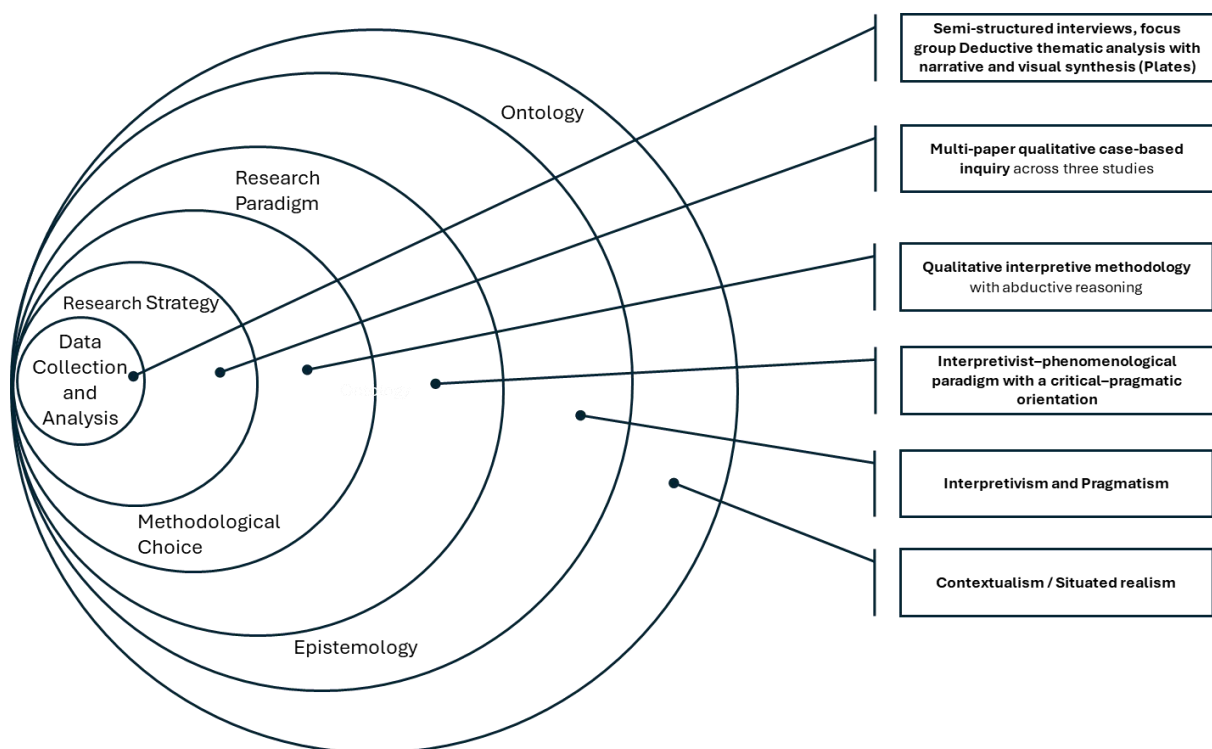


Figure 1 Research Onion

The thesis adopts a contextualist ontology and an interpretivist-pragmatic epistemology, supporting a paradigm that combines phenomenological insight with critical-pragmatic

inquiry. This philosophical base informs a qualitative methodology, drawing on abductive reasoning, and a case-based strategy that uses semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Analysis is conducted through thematic and narrative synthesis, enabling the study to remain sensitive to context, ethical complexity, and meaning-making in practice.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis is positioned within an interpretivist-phenomenological paradigm with a critical-pragmatic orientation. According to Tsoukas et al. (2024), generating theories about organizational phenomena inevitably involves philosophical questions. Moreover, a philosophical approach to organization studies aims to scrutinize, critique, and clarify key concepts, modes of thinking, research practices, as well as assumptions about reality and ways of justifying knowledge claims in order to deliver meaning (Tsoukas et al. 2024). Drawing on philosophy to articulate and problematize conceptual categories and frameworks empowers scholars to develop new modes of theorizing, introduce fresh distinctions, devise innovative concepts and establish new methods for empirical inquiry that reveal reality in organisations (Spicer & Alvesson 2025).

An interpretive phenomenological study aims to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon, representing an individual level of analysis with an understanding that social contexts are embedded within an individual's being (i.e., being-with-others) (Frechette et al. 2020). The pragmatic orientation focuses on praxis and practical knowledge development, cooperation between all research participants, and the need for finding and constructing a common ground between them as a platform for action with researchers as partners in this dialogue (Johansson & Lindhult 2008). Therefore, the chosen paradigm and orientation are particularly suited to addressing the research question:

How do public sector project managers negotiate, interpret, and enact authority and autonomy within formal project management structures?

Given the complexity of projectification in the public sector, this research does not assume a single objective reality but rather acknowledges that meaning is socially constructed through project managers' lived experiences. The interpretivist approach allows for an in-depth examination of the ways in which standardized methodologies (e.g., PRINCE2, PMBOK) shape or constrain managerial discretion. The phenomenological perspective ensures that the

research captures how project managers experience and navigate these methodological constraints in practice.

This thesis draws on Derridean deconstruction and Heideggerian comportment not only as theoretical tools but as methodological lenses. Firstly, Derridean philosophy exposes the aporetic nature of theorising about organisations and enables the understanding of how the impossible acts as a necessary limit for identifying how organizations and social actors function (Rasche 2011).

Within organization studies Heidegger's theory has been adopted in the analysis of four areas. Firstly, "the study of individual action by investigating people's lived experience or understanding of their work situation and what it means for them (e.g., of leaders, managers, strategy makers, etc.); second, the study of social action by investigating how collectives (teams, departments, communities within organizations, as well as whole organizations) understand or make sense of their situation; third, the study of how aspects of human reality are constructed through the interaction between people, either at a microlevel or at the macrolevel (e.g., at the microlevel, ethnomethodological studies and at the macro level, institutional theory studies, the macroinstitutional theory studies, some discourse studies, and gender studies); fourth, the study of human action and activities by taking a point of departure in social practice (e.g., the recent practice-based studies within strategy and knowledge in organizations)" (Holt & Sandberg 2011, p. 230).

The perspectives of Derrida and Heidegger emphasize that project management frameworks are not rigid structures, but dynamic texts open to interpretation. Arendtian concepts of action and natality further inform the study, emphasizing the project manager's role in shaping and transforming their environment through discretionary action. Applying Arendt's theory of action and natality makes clear that action will always be needed to shape, defend and enlarge the space for action within the realm of organizational studies via freedom and internal desires of social actors to initiate action (van Diest & Dankbaar 2008).

3.3 EPISTEMOLOGY: INTERPRETIVISM

This research takes an interpretivist epistemological stance, recognizing that knowledge is constructed through interactions with formalized methodologies and organizational structures (Heracleous 2004, p. 176). It moves away from positivist assumptions that project management methodologies can be universally applied, instead emphasizing the situated and

contingent nature of project work (Smyth & Morris 2007). Key epistemological influences include:

- **Derrida's deconstruction and différance:** Recognizing that formal project management frameworks (e.g., PRINCE2, PMBOK) contain inherent contradictions and gaps that enable discretionary action. Derrida's term deconstruction provisions how language creates meaning within and across texts which is conditional upon binary oppositions and hierarchical structures as meaning cannot be fully grasped, whereas différance means both a difference and an act of deferring to create meaning (Nuyen 1989)
- **Heidegger's concept of practical comportment:** Understanding project managing as an embodied, practical engagement with methodologies rather than a mechanical application of prescribed rules. The concept is utilised to identify the daily activities of public sector project managers, as it provides a lens through which their instinctive, context-sensitive decision-making processes can be examined (van der Hoorn & Whitty 2019)
- **Arendt's notion of action and natality:** Framing project managers as active participants who reshape their project environments through interpretive and ethical judgment. Action is oriented toward the expression of freedom and the initiation of something new and the concept of natality reflects the human capacity to initiate, innovate, and bring something unprecedented into the world (Arendt 1998).

3.4 ONTOLOGY: CONSTRUCTIVIST AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL

This thesis assumes a constructivist ontology, positioning projectification as an evolving process shaped by individual and collective interpretations rather than as a fixed structural reality. Organizational ontology reflects such constructivist concerns through emphasising that there is no external or internal organization beyond the mutually constituting activity of members' interactional work (Westwood & Clegg 2009). A phenomenological approach to organizational studies advances our understanding of human action and activities in organizations that are collectively and exclusively shared by those members' in the subject organization (Holt & Sandberg 2011).

The combined constructivist and phenomenological approach is adopted in this research to capture project managers' lived experiences, ensuring that their perspectives and decision-making processes are foregrounded in the analysis. This is to determine and identify how public sector project managers apply methodologies, their level of authority and what organizational constraints exist for the purpose of constructing the reality of public sector project management.

3.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The thesis is structured around three components, each contributing distinct but complementary insights into public sector project managing.

3.5.1 Study 1 (Chapter 4): Creating Authority and Autonomy

Chapter 4 is a study that was published in *Project Leadership and Society* and utilises data from the first qualitative data collection pertaining this overarching thesis.

3.5.1.1 Research Design

The research design for Chapter 4 is a qualitative study that utilises Derrida's concepts of deconstruction and *différance* to identify the organisational conditions affecting contemporary public sector organisations and how public sector project managers delivered projects in lieu of these conditions. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with nine senior project managers in an Australian state government department. There was a key focus on examining how project managers balance institutional authority and personal autonomy when engaging with standardized project management methodologies.

Theoretical insights include mainly that public sector project managers defer and suspend project management processes when confronted with the political pressures imposed on their public sector organization. The study reveals that public sector organisations are dynamic in nature which creates a tension between standard project management processes and the reality of project managing in public sector organisations resulting in public sector project managers acquiring authority and autonomy to enable project delivery.

A deductive thematic analysis was applied utilising Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) six phase model to identify patterns in how managers negotiate authority. Lastly, Derrida's concept of deconstruction and *différance* was applied to analyse patterns found in the thematic analysis

to reconstruct phenomena explained by participants at both the organizational level and personal level.

3.5.2 Study 2 (Chapter 5): The Pragmatic Comportment Compass

Following the publication of Study 1, Chapter 5 was published in *Project Leadership and Society* and sought to identify the decision-making processes by public sector project managers in real-time given that Study 1 identified high levels of authority and autonomy.

3.5.2.1 Research Design

The research design consisted of applying Heideggerian Phenomenology, in particular his concept of Comportment to ascertain the lived experience of public sector project managers in project delivery. This is supplemented by a thematic Analysis. Data was collection via focus groups with the same nine public sector project managers from Study 1 to discuss their decision-making experiences. Utilising (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2012) six phase model for thematic analysis and Heidegger's concept of Comportment, public sector project managers comported themselves in four directions when project managing.

Four themes associated with decision making were identified from the thematic analysis, resulting in the development of the Pragmatic Comportment Compass. The research design reveals an alignment with Heidegger's concept of comportment; project managers engage practically rather than prescriptively displays parallels with Arendt's concept of action; discretion is exercised not in opposition to structure, but as part of navigating it.

3.5.3 Study 3 (Chapter 6): The Ethics of Project Managing

The research design for this study is solidified on intellectual inquiry, philosophical synthesis. Philosophy provides a distinctive contribution in shedding light on otherwise under-explored profiles of public organisations, especially in interdisciplinary studies of government that involve both public administration and management to inform a critical stance (Ongaro 2019; Tang et al. 2024). In management science, the text serves as a transitional object for transformational purposes and as a consequence, the text is a means, not an end in itself and its interpretation a subject of inner and outer discovery in dialogue with others (Lenssen 2010). Moreover, Lenssen (2010) explains that by using texts from wisdom traditions, participants feel connected to many generations who faced similar challenges in albeit different circumstances. Based on the significance and rich meaning texts provide, the focus

of Study 3 synthesizes the findings from Chapters 4 and 5 and extends them, drawing new conclusions beyond their scope through critically analysing both texts.

3.5.3.1 Research Design

Study 3 explores project managing through the philosophies of Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida to deconstruct assumptions in projectification literature and more specifically the texts contained in Chapter 4 and 5. It interprets managerial discretion as a creative, political act and bridges project management research with existential-phenomenological inquiry.

The key contributions of Chapter 6 is that it firstly proposes an alternative conceptualization of projectification as a process of meaning-making and strategic adaptation and secondly challenges the assumption that more methodologies and red-tape equals better project outcomes.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

3.6.1 Thematic Analysis

Data gathered through the semi-structured interviews and a focus group was thematically analysed. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method used to identify themes or patterns in data. It is a common form of analysis when little is known of a phenomenon and when important concepts need to be captured (Given 2008; Allen 2017). It seeks to find ‘...commonalties, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles’ (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe 2009, p. 2). It provided the deductive approach required to allow for the complex and nuanced nature of project managing in a public sector environment, and is frequently used to research phenomena in project management and public administration studies (Ebrahimi & Eynali 2019; van der Hoorn & Whitty 2019; Wipulanusat et al. 2019).

Braun and Clarke (2012) six-phase model for undertaking a thematic analysis was utilised and is expanded on in Chapters 4 and 5:

1. Familiarization with Data
2. Generating Initial Codes
3. Searching for Themes

4. Reviewing Themes
5. Defining Themes
6. Producing the Report.

3.6.2 Philosophical Inquiry and Deconstruction

The purpose of adopting three philosophical positions is to thoroughly explore the phenomena of public sector project managing via the lived experience of public sector project managers. The advantages of doing so are for the purpose of:

- **Derridean Deconstruction:** Identifying gaps and tensions in project management frameworks – through the eyes of public sector project managers
- **Heideggerian Analysis:** Understanding how managers engage with methodologies in practical ways
- **Arendtian Action:** Examining how managers exercise discretion as a form of political agency. Internal desire to initiate action and the freedom required to do so.

3.6.3 Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to rigorous ethical standards that align to the University of Southern Queensland Human Ethics protocols, ensuring:

- Full ethics approval was obtained H18REA211. Consent forms were sent and signed by participants for the interviews and focus groups
- Interviews went for a duration of 30 minutes
- Focus group was a 90-minute discussion
- Confidentiality was ensured through coding with a pseudonym/alias to prevent identification in data and results
- As an inside researcher, I remained completely independent and performed both qualitative studies in a way that interviews and the focus group were a reflective exercise for each practitioner that participated.

3.7 SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined the research design, epistemology, and methodological approach underpinning the study. By adopting an interpretivist-phenomenological paradigm, the thesis captures the dynamic ways in which public sector project managers navigate standardized methodologies, exercising discretion and strategic adaptation. The methodological approach integrates thematic analysis and philosophical inquiry, ensuring that the study remains grounded in both practical engagement and theoretical depth. The next chapters will present the findings from each of the three studies, demonstrating how project managers create, navigate, and negotiate authority and autonomy within public sector projectification.

THE PROJECTIFIED LIFE



The towering pillars of project management knowledge provide both authority and autonomy. They shelter project managers from bureaucratic storms, allowing them to focus on the real work of project managing, where adaptability and action respond to reality.

Plate 1: The Pillars That Set Us Free

PLATE 1 ILLUSTRATION

Plate 1: The Pillars That Set Us Free illustrates the central argument of Chapter 4. It shows that project management reference documents do not simply constrain practitioners. Instead, they create space for discretion, legitimacy, and professional action. The image presents these documents as towering pillars: PMBOK Guide, PRINCE2, Agile, APMBok, MSP, and others. Together, they form a grand structure labelled "Project Management," within which practitioners are shown actively working, engaging, and interacting.

This architecture symbolises how reference documents offer both authority and protection. They shelter project managers from bureaucratic storms while enabling them to act with autonomy. The pillars are not walls of control. Rather, they are supports that allow flexibility and adaptation. Within their shelter, project managers are free to carry out the real work of project managing, where interpretation, judgement, and action are tailored to the demands of the moment.

The open archway to the sky represents potential. It reminds us that project management methodologies, while structured, are not static. They are used by people who adapt them to complex environments. This reflects the thesis's argument that the strength of these bodies of knowledge lies not in rigid enforcement but in their ability to confer legitimacy on discretion.

Overall, the image captures the paradox at the heart of Chapter 4. These methodologies are often seen as tools of control. In practice, however, they provide the very justification that enables project managers to exercise judgement, navigate complexity, and act ethically within the constraints of public sector governance.

CHAPTER 4: CREATING AUTHORITY AND AUTONOMY: NECESSARY DIALECTICAL TENSIONS IN PUBLIC SECTOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the full manuscript for the first peer reviewed paper developed as part of this doctoral research study (Study 1). The paper is titled *Creating Authority and Autonomy: Necessary Dialectical Tensions in Public Sector Project Management*. It is published in *Project Leadership and Society*.

4.2 KEY RELEVANCE TO THIS THESIS

- Project managers are confronted with the impossible which causes tensions between traditional project management practice and the conditions faced by public sector organisations
- Project managers deal with these tensions through deferring and suspending project processes and deconstructing the situation they are confronted with
- This research provides a new outlook on projectification and what it has evolved into.

4.3 CITATION AND CO-AUTHOR DETAILS

Table 1: Citation details of original Chapter 4 publication

Citation details	Published Rowe, K. M., Whitty, S. J., & van der Hoorn, B. (2024). Creating authority and autonomy: Necessary dialectical tensions in public sector project management. <i>Project Leadership and Society</i> , 100119.
Writing	Kevan Michael Rowe (80%) Dr S. Jon Whitty (10%) Dr Bronte van der Hoorn (10%)
Data collection and analysis	Kevan Michael Rowe (100%)
Quality review	Kevan Michael Rowe (80%) Dr S. Jon Whitty (10%) Dr Bronte van der Hoorn (10%)

4.4 ABSTRACT

This study investigates the nuanced relationship between public sector project managers and their adherence to organizational project management protocols, as defined by reference documents such as PRINCE2 and PMBOK® Guide. It investigates why these project managers frequently deviate from these protocols. The study investigates the practical relevance yet perceived redundancy of these documents through interviews and a focus group with nine experienced project managers in the Australian public sector. Using thematic analysis and a Derridean perspective, we show how these documents create a project manager's their authority and autonomy. The study concludes with the proposal of a deconstructive theory of public sector project management, emphasising pragmatism over rigid adherence to established project management ideologies.

Key Words: Projectification; Public sector; Derridean theory; Deconstruction; Différance

4.5 INTRODUCTION

The public sector has undergone projectification, a trend that organizes tasks into distinct projects with clear goals, scopes, and budgets. This is particularly significant in the public sector, intersecting with bureaucratic systems and public accountability (Edelenbos & Klijn 2009; Hodgson et al. 2019). The shift towards projectification has transformed public organizations globally (Jacobsen 2022), necessitating an exploration of its specific challenges and dynamics, distinct from other organizational contexts.

Hodgson et al. (2019) identify the tension arising from the public sector's projectification, especially in balancing project efficiency with public service mandates. This creates a compelling study area, particularly in understanding how public sector project managers navigate these dual pressures.

Despite the expectation to adhere to standardized processes from reference documents like PMBOK® Guide and PRINCE2, public sector project managers often deviate from these protocols (McGrath & Whitty 2019; Queensland Audit Office 2020; Office of the Auditor General Western Australia 2021). This deviation raises critical questions about the influence of these documents on public sector processes and the relationship project managers have with these systems.

Our study, recognizing the influence of standard reference documents on public sector project management processes (Hodgson et al. 2019), focuses on understanding their practical application. We explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What specific conditions in public organizations challenge the applicability of standard project management reference documents?

RQ2: Under these challenging conditions, which elements of these documents are often not enforced or are suspended?

RQ3: Drawing insights from the findings of RQ1 and RQ2, what can be revealed about the relationship between public organization project managers and their reference documents?

While these reference documents may not fully capture the project field's complexity, they embed universal concepts into organizational practices (Lundin & Söderholm 1995; Winter et al. 2006; Hodgson et al. 2019) and make projects tangible for managers (Hodgson & Cicmil 2006b). Yet, the mechanisms underlying this at the metastructural level are unknown, and practical aspects of project management frequently present distinct challenges not explicitly addressed in these documents (van der Hoorn 2015; van der Hoorn & Whitty 2019).

To investigate the relationship between public sector project managers and reference documents, we use two theoretical approaches. An interpretive lens is employed for RQ1 and RQ2, using semi-structured interviews and a focus group with senior Australian public sector project managers. This method helps develop themes depicting the interaction between managers and reference documents as shaped by organizational project management processes. For RQ3, a Derridean lens (summarised in column 1 Table 2), focusing on *différance* and deconstruction, is used to explore the tension between project managers' need for authority and autonomy.

Our findings show that public sector project managers rely on the reference documents for both authority and autonomy. They produce a treaty-like framework that balances official mandates with the flexibility required for effective project delivery.

Our paper is organized to align the literature review directly with our research questions, situating public sector project managers within the broader context of increasing projectification. In our theoretical framework, we explain Derrida's concepts of *différance* and deconstruction to explore how these managers navigate discourses shaped by project management reference documents. *Différance* acts as a cloak or veiling force, obscuring the real challenges of public sector project managing, while practical deconstruction is presented as an effective strategy to navigate and transcend these limitations.

Finally, we propose a deconstructive theory of public sector project managing, advocating for a pragmatic approach that balances theoretical guidelines with the realities of a project manager's discretion. This paper challenges common assumptions, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of these documents in both public sector operations and the broader field of project management.

4.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

The projectification of public sector organisations is a growing area of interest for researchers (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015; Fred 2020; Wenhold 2022). This is because public organisations deliver socially significant projects of high dollar value that can occur in rapid response situations, yet how project managers accomplish this is widely unknown or misrepresented (Fred 2020). While some argue that the projectification of public sector organisations reinforces bureaucracy (Fred 2020; Mukhtar-Landgren 2021), others argue that projectification disrupts bureaucracy— and that's a good thing (Clegg 1990; Donnellon & Heckscher 1994). In this section, we synthesise the fundamental issues of this discourse, including project management reference documents as a visible sign of projectification in public organisations, the motivation for projectification in public organisations, and its debatable influence. We put the increasing projectification of public organisations in conversation with existing literature that problematizes project management reference documents in order to reveal the complication that motivates our study, given that reference documents are somewhat ingrained and naturalised in public organisation project processes (Hodgson et al. 2019).

4.6.1 Projectification of Public Organisations

Public organisations, along with society at large, are increasingly projectified (Schoper 2018). Public organisations websites give reference to the embedding of tools and techniques from

reference documents (such as PRINCE2 and the PMBOK® Guide) into organisational processes. For example, various Australian state government department websites refer to the use of project control boards, the role of a Senior Responsible Owner, and describe the use of Project Status Reports (Tasmanian Government 2011; State of Victoria 2019; State of Western Australia 2019). These reference documents also commonly underpin government training programs (Australian Federal Government 2008; State of Western Australia 2012; State of Victoria 2018; Australian Federal Government 2021; State of New South Wales 2021). This embedding of project management reference documents is also evident in European and American public organisations (U.S Department of Energy 2015; United Kingdom Government 2021).

The penetration of project management reference documents into the public sector has attracted the attention of researchers who are particularly interested in why the European Union as a region has experienced widespread projectification (see, for example, Lundin (2011); Fred (2015, 2019); Jałocha (2019)). Some propose that projectification reinforces public sector bureaucracy (Fred 2020; Mukhtar-Landgren 2021) while others argue it disrupts bureaucracy (Clegg 1990; Donnellon & Heckscher 1994), as projectification is regarded as an attempt to mimic the flexibility, innovation, and efficiency of the private sector through a less bureaucratic approach to their work (Sjöblom, Löfgren & Godenhjelm 2013; Hodgson et al. 2019). In either case, the time-bound and future-focused nature of projects is appealing to politicians and bureaucrats who are increasingly focused on short-term results (Fred & Hall 2017). Nevertheless, the projectification of public organisations has come under increased scrutiny (Edelenbos & Klijn 2009).

Projectification has structural implications and impacts for the workforce, and often fails to live up to the hype of agility and timely delivery. Poland's public organisations have been reshaped through 'Europeanisation', a form of coercive isomorphism associated with their administration of initiatives funded by the European Union (Jałocha 2019). There are concerns that projectification may fragment permanent organisations and jeopardise their ability to maintain service coordination and continuity (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015). In some countries, such as Slovenia, projectification is reducing job security and diminishing employee professional status (Greer, Samaluk & Umney 2019). According to a study of agri-environmental policy in the United States, projectification is unlikely to achieve the desired decentralisation and relaxation of bureaucratic constraints (Munck Af

Rosenschöld & Wolf 2017). In Sweden a similar situation is observed, where a study exploring the projectification of social funds administration finds that “the project model means a reinforcement of hierarchical order” (Fred & Hall 2017, p. 201). And does an excessive emphasis on methodologies induce moral blindness (Sayer 2011)?

An increasing reliance on the project management reference documents as the basis for projectifying public organisations is also of concern to researchers (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015), as public sector organisations differ from their private sector counterparts and have issues with a one-size-fits-all project management approach (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015). As an example, in an autoethnographic account of health researchers being trained in PRINCE2, the researchers ultimately rejected the technocratic form of rationality inherent in the methodology in favour of the moral and ethical concerns that are central to health care (Shaw, Hughes & Greenhalgh 2019). For these health researchers, everything was being problematised through the language of PRINCE2, in terms of business case, products, and customer, and these conceptualisations of their world seemed foreign in a sector concerned with caring for people’s health.

4.6.2 The Dichotomous Nature of Project Management Practitioner Reference Documents

The reference documents have had an omnipresent influence on the identity and legitimacy of the project management profession and its practitioners. From the mid-1980s the PMBOK® Guide was being recognised as central to the profession’s identity and as influencing managerial thinking across the globe (Curling 1995; Lundin & Söderholm 1995), and its powerful influence continues today (Morris et al. 2006; Blomquist, Farashah & Thomas 2018). There are over 1 million certified Project Management Professionals (PMP) (Project Management Institute 2021b) and over 1 million certified PRINCE2 professionals (PRINCE2 2021). Scholars acknowledge that practitioners derive their professional identity and credibility through the professional associations and industry certifications that base themselves on these reference documents (Hällgren et al. 2012). However, considering the ‘not fit-for-purpose’ concerns regarding the use of these reference documents in public organisation (McGrath & Whitty 2020a), the sustained criticism of these sacred cows (Muriithi & Crawford 2003) comes as no surprise.

Broadly speaking, considering the production process of their theoretical grounding and their content, the project management reference documents are seen as problematic by the

scholarly community. For example, since it began the Project Management Institute's production of the PMBOK® Guide has marginalised research, preferring to remain self-referential (Morris et al. 2006); behaviour that still continues (Svejvig & Andersen 2015). And while the theoretical grounding of the reference documents is characterised as fractured at best (Smyth & Morris 2007) or missing entirely (Shepherd & Atkinson 2011), their production does not give sufficient attention to the realities of practice (Besner & Hobbs 2012; Badewi 2016). Furthermore, project management reference documents fail to give sufficient attention to the socio-political nature of projects and factors such as power structures and emotion (Smith 2011; Andersen 2016). Complexity and uncertainty suffer from similar underrepresentation in the reference documents (Lenfle & Loch 2010; Svejvig & Andersen 2015; Davies & Brady 2016; Kiridena & Sense 2016). Moreover, not only do the reference documents offer conflicting definition of key terms between them, many lack an internal cohesion (McGrath & Whitty 2019).

Nevertheless, what inspires this study is that project managers considers these reference documents much more favourably, claiming they are indeed effective, though practitioners do modify and customise them, and create 'lite' versions of them (McGrath & Whitty 2020b). This apparent complication in the literature could be explained by taking a contingency approach to practice (Shenhar 2001; Besner & Hobbs 2012), where situational awareness is deemed necessary and some discretionary powers are essential, as a 'one size fits all' bureaucratic project management approach can be problematic (Barbosa et al. 2021). Furthermore, truly bureaucratic approaches are plagued by uncertainty and the presence of a collectivism culture (Chipulu & Vahidi 2020). Even a government's project management choices must take the context of individual initiatives into account, as public organisation initiatives are "affected by enough dynamic factors to require contingent approaches" (Mitchell 2019, p. 802).

This review highlights the pervasive projectification of public organizations and the critical role of project management reference documents within this context. We observe a dichotomy: these documents are both integral to and at times at odds with the unique, dynamic conditions of the public sector, which leads us to the following three propositions:

Proposition 1: The standardised nature and generic content of project management policies and processes derived from reference documents frequently clash with the unique, dynamic conditions of public sector projects in public organisations.

Proposition 2: As a result of these difficult conditions in public sector environments, certain aspects of public sector project management policies and processes, which are also derived from reference documents, are frequently not enforced or suspended to better fit contextual realities.

Proposition 3: The manner in which public sector project managers interact with, adapt to, or disregard protocols derived from reference documents reveals a complex, nuanced relationship between theoretical best practises and practical public sector project management realities.

These propositions guide the formulation of our research questions:

RQ1: In public organizations, what conditions are challenging for reference documents?

RQ2: Given these challenging conditions, which aspects of reference documents are not enforced or are suspended?

RQ3: Drawing insights from the findings of RQ1 and RQ2, what can be revealed about the relationship between public organization project managers and their reference documents?

To address RQ1 and RQ2, a thematic analysis of interview transcripts will enable us to identify and understand the specific conditions in public organizations that challenge the applicability of reference documents, and which aspects of these documents are not enforced or are suspended. However, to address RQ3, a more metastructural analysis is necessary. Here, we apply a Derridean lens of *différance* and deconstruction to uncover often hidden aspects of this relationship, revealing insights into the interplay between theoretical constructs and their practical application in the real world of public sector project managing.

4.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A DERRIDEAN LENS OF DIFFÉRANCE AND DECONSTRUCTION

The first eight components of our Derridean lens pertain to *différance*, while the ninth component pertains to deconstruction. In column 1 of Table 2, each is summarised in terms relevant to this research.

4.7.1 A Structure of the Present: Temporality and Lived Experience

We experience the present through engaging in the world; we are immersed in it (*facere veritatem* – to make the truth come out) (Caputo 2012). We experience the present *as if* it is a continuation with the story we feel or imagine ourselves immersed in. Built into the present is our sense of anticipating what *should* (our subjective expectation) happen, and how we may want to, or not, intervene in the present to alter its course. As illustrated in Figure 2, the present is *a consequence of* (anchored in) what is Already Done and what is Yet To Do.

Husserl (1966) further explores the structure of our consciousness of the present in terms of perception, incorporating retention (what is retained from the past) and protention (what is projected or how we begin to shape the forthcoming moments). Consequently, our perception of the present encapsulates elements of the past and serves as a crystallization point for an immediate future now.

This understanding leads us to the realization that the past and future are not separate entities but are interconnected within the present. The present encompasses the resonances of past actions (retentions), while simultaneously hosting ongoing actions that open-up or constrain possibilities and opportunities for future actions (protention). Consequently, the present represents our orientation towards an imagined future, grounded in the interplay between what has already transpired and what we perceive lies ahead.

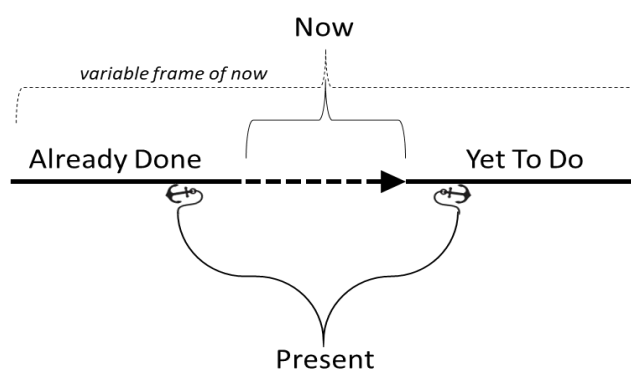


Figure 2: 'The Present' is unreflexive and anchored to the Already Done and Yet To Do. 'The Now' is reflexive and takes place within a variable frame.

In the context of a project, in dealing with an unexpected issue one feels the urgency of the present. To make an immediate decision, one balances past experiences (retention) with future project goals (protention).

4.7.2 A Framing of Now: Contextualizing or Articulating the Present

In Derridean thought, the distinction between 'the now' and 'the present' lies in the variability of the duration or frame of reference in which they occur. For instance, while watching a movie, a friend may ask, 'What's going on now?' Here, 'now' is situated within the duration of the movie. In a different context, a stakeholder might inquire, 'What's the status of the project now?' In this case, 'now' is positioned within the duration of the project. These examples reflect that 'the now' encompasses a reflective component, unlike 'the present'. Consequently, what we understand as 'the present' emerges as a lived experience of what we perceive as 'the now.'

4.7.3 Creation of Binary Opposition and Hierarchies: Interpreting Reality

In Derridean philosophy, the concept of Différance (with an 'a' instead of an 'e') highlights the continuous process of differencing and the artificial production of binary structures (Derrida 1973, 1978). These binary pairings, such as 'this and that,' actively contribute to the formation of meaning and the existence of our experiences. Différance, as a shared meta-structure inherent in all of us, plays a crucial role in shaping our perception of reality, facilitating communication, and enabling reflection upon our encounters. However, it is important to recognize that différance is not a neutral process; it is imbued with biological and cultural biases and preconceptions. Consequently, the production of social and cultural objects with contextualized meanings through différance appears to distance us from nature and the ontological actuality.

Derrida (1997) suggests that binary structures generate tension, compelling us to seek resolution and propelling us from the perceived past (the already done) towards a subjectively imagined future (the yet to do). This tension influences our actions in the present, as we grapple with what has transpired and what remains to be accomplished. Our understanding of "what's happening now?" emerges through contemplation of the present, and it is through this process of reflection that our current state of being takes shape.

Hierarchies are intimately tied to the production of binary oppositions within différance. As we construct binary pairs, one element often assumes a superior or dominant position over the other, establishing a hierarchical relationship. These hierarchies influence our perception, interpretation, and evaluation of reality. For example, a project manager might navigate binary choices like cost vs. quality, often placing more importance on one over the other, thereby creating a hierarchy of priorities.

4.7.4 Negation and Absencing: Differentiating Reality

According to Kant (2007), the presence of something is not an isolated phenomenon but rather emerges through its relational dynamics with its opposite elements (negation) and elements that are not physically present (absencing). To illustrate, the recognition of 'our car' as being present relies on the process of differentiating it from other cars based on shared characteristics, such as wheels, windows, and seats. In this context, we identify our car by distinguishing it from other cars nearby (negation) and also by recalling from memory cars that are absent but previously encountered.

To further complicate the concept of absencing, the presence of something can be established by invoking its previous state (that it no longer is) or its potential future state (that it is yet to become). For instance, the presence of a sprout, when asked "What is this?", necessitates its differentiation from its previous version or state (a seed), which is absent, as well as its differentiation from the tree it has the potential to become, which is also absent. As a result, the presence of something depends on the use of reference signs to establish relationships, which directs our attention to what requires attending to, which directs our actions.

In a project context, its status is defined not only by the tangible work completed but also by important features that were decided against including (negation). Furthermore, its direction is influenced by its envisioned final form – a state yet to be realized (absencing) – which though intangible now, significantly impacts present choices.

4.7.5 Ideals as References: Shaping Perception and Guiding Action

Our relationship with ideals and their associated histories is intricate and multifaceted (Smith 2005). Beyond abstract concepts like democracy or justice and their normative implications, ideals encompass personal and subjective notions of how things *should* be (Derrida 2012). In this complex dynamic, one aspect stands out: our persistent desire to actualize ideals. While we strive to materialize democracy and justice through political and legal systems, ideals also shape our approach to project execution within organizations, guided by an internalized logic aligned with an ideal vision (Packendorff 1995).

Interestingly, in terms of their internal driving mechanism, every endeavour to manifest ideals in the real world inevitably encounters transgressions and flaws that compromise their essence. Consequently, ideals are inherently destined to be compromised. However, rooted in our natural metaphysics (Kant 2007), there exists an innate compulsion that propels us

forward and motivates us to pursue improvement. For instance, the pursuit of democracy necessitates striving for freedom, which may conflict with the pursuit of equality. These inherent flaws in the ideal of democracy, when revealed, serve as a catalyst for corrective action, leading to the emergence of further binary oppositions. Similarly, within the context of project work in an organization, the exercise of power to effectively manage a project inevitably gives rise to challenges in managing the organization as a whole, creating a ripple effect on the project itself (Hodgson & Cicmil 2006a).

Relevant to our study, as project managers recall various project episodes or 'nows,' these moments arise from the tension and divergence (*différance*) between their past perception of reality and the ideal, between what they perceive as the 'already been done' and what they ideally have 'yet to do.' These experiences are articulated through signs, words, and concepts associated with the ideal, particularly when certain components of the ideal are absent. When we ask a project manager, "What are you doing now?" their response teems with traces and absences of the ideal, as they lack alternative means of expression within the specific context where the ideal resides.

4.7.6 Interconnectedness and Contextuality: The Relational Nature of Presencing

For Derrida (1997), the experience of the present is characterized by its interconnectedness with other signifiers and signs, such that the meaning we derive from the present is not contained within the words or representations themselves but emerges from the network of relationships they have with other concepts. For instance, the meaning of "white" is inseparable from our understanding of "black," and the concept of "tree" encompasses the significance of "seed." This interconnectedness of differences permeates the present, shaping our interpretation of it. Consequently, the act of articulation (speaking, writing, drawing) involves a rupture or split from the broader context and the interplay of interconnected meanings. In this context, the concept of a project is deeply intertwined with its stakeholders (McGrath & Whitty 2017), as they not only influence but also define the project's essence, with their needs, expectations, and interactions shaping its trajectory.

4.7.7 Signification and Meaning: Eclipsing the Significance of the Present

In our exploration of the signification and meaning of the present, we encounter the concept of *différance* being overshadowed by ideal representations. This phenomenon obscures the true essence of what actually exists. (Derrida 1973). In this context then, when project managers reflect on past project events, their reliance on concepts and language from

reference documents can mask the authentic nature of their project managing practice and the reality of their actions.

A tangible example of this can be observed in the act of pencil sketching on paper. As the sketch emerges from the process, certain areas are shaded darker while others remain contrasting and white. Beneath the surface of pencil sketching lies a deeper exploration of the artist's unspoken narratives and intentions. This sketching process becomes a medium for delving into the complexities of the artist's thoughts, emotions, and the social dynamics influencing their creativity. The act of sketching itself often takes precedence, overshadowing the motivations behind it. This dynamic reflects the concept of *différance*, where the act and its outcome are mutually dependent yet require a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations for full coherence. Applying this to the project context, the formal adherence to methodologies could overshadow the need for flexibility, masking the real complexities of project dynamics and necessitating a nuanced application of these structured approaches, which might even involve doing their opposite.

4.7.8 The Flux of Meaning: The Instability of the Past, Present, and Future

The notion of *Différance* illuminates the inherent instability and flux of meaning associated with the past, the present, and the future. For instance, a project manager is managing a software development project, and one of the initial requirements was to incorporate a particular feature into the final product. However, during the development process, market conditions and user preferences shifted, rendering this feature unnecessary or even detrimental to users. As a result, what was previously considered 'great work done' and a significant contribution to the project now has a different meaning. The implementation of this requirement is now deemed a waste of time and resources.

The anchoring of *Différance* to an ideal amplifies the inherent instability of meaning. While the ideal serves as a reference point, it remains imperfect due to necessary inherent contradictions (as discussed in **Error! Reference source not found.**). Further *différance* introduces disruptions by revealing gaps and contradictions that challenge and destabilize previously assigned meanings, thereby perpetually deferring any notion of true or stable meaning.

4.7.9 Deconstruction and Natural Metaphysics: Our Propensity for Forward Movement by Means of Challenging Assumptions

According to Kant (2007), humans possess an intrinsic inclination to transcend their immediate sensory experiences and delve into profound questions about reality and meaning. This natural tendency, also known as natural metaphysics, resonates with Derrida's notion of deconstruction (Derrida 1997). Typically, his method of deconstruction is applied to text as a means of exposing the text to a multiplicity of meanings by dismantling binary structures to demonstrate that seemingly distinct things are not so distinct after all. Nevertheless, deconstruction can also be viewed as an active engagement with the present through physical and mental action, and it involves not only understanding the present but also challenging its assumptions, exposing its biases, and resolving its contradictions.

Famously, Derrida argues that justice *is* deconstruction (Cornell, Rosenfeld & Carlson 2016; Caputo 2018). By temporarily suspending the law, the judge allows for an original and responsible interpretation of the issue at hand. This suspension affords the judge an opportunity for introspection and reinvention, allowing him or her to transcend the confines of established rules and norms. Even so, it is essential to recognise that this suspension does not completely nullify the law. Rather, it is a temporary suspension of legal constraints in order to engage in a nuanced and context-sensitive analysis of the case. The perspective of Derrida emphasises the dialectical nature of the temporary suspension of the law. While the judge engages in a moment of suspension, it is essential to recognise that the legitimacy and authority of the law underpins the very existence of the court, lawyers, legal system, and the judge. It is the law that provides the framework within which these entities operate and derive their authority and power.

Finally, Derrida (Cornell, Rosenfeld & Carlson 2016; Caputo 2018) and others (Lévinas 1969; Butler 2010) contend that that human beings possess an inherent imperative for justice—an innate moral intuition or instinct that compels individuals to strive for fairness and equality—for ourselves and others. However, according to Derrida (Cornell, Rosenfeld & Carlson 2016; Caputo 2018) the law alone is not sufficient for the pursuit of justice, despite its role in establishing the necessary conditions. While the law provides a structure, framework, and authoritative foundation for the administration of justice, it is ultimately subject to the judge's autonomy for interpretation and reinvention. The inherent tensions between the law's ideal generality and the specific circumstances of each case are pivotal in creating an environment that fosters the emergence of new interpretations and decisions.

Consequently, the process of justice requires a space for "fresh judgement" (Cornell, Rosenfeld & Carlson 2016), the courtroom, and the law *creates* this space, allowing the process of justice to acknowledge and accommodate unique circumstances and go beyond simple adherence to existing rules.

Consider an urban redevelopment project with a variety of stakeholders and interests. A project manager might need to constantly challenge assumptions and norms. Urban development laws and regulations serve as their guidelines, but to find creative solutions that strike a balance between the needs of the stakeholders and the constraints imposed by the law, they must engage in a process of deconstruction that entails challenging and reinterpreting these rules.

4.8 METHODOLOGY

By intertwining interpretivism with a Derridean perspective, our research adopts a multifaceted approach to probe the intricate and dynamic relationship between public sector project managers and their reference documents. This integrated methodological framework is tailored to capture the nuanced experiences of these managers, specifically focusing on the aspects of organizational project management protocols they choose not to enforce or suspend, and the conditions precipitating these decisions. It also aims to unravel the underlying structures guiding their interactions with these documents. This approach is strategically designed to yield deep insights into the meta-level aspects of this relationship, thereby enriching our understanding of project management practices within the public sector.

4.8.1 Data Collection Method

We conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with nine senior and experienced project managers from the Australian public sector to gather information to answer our research questions. These participants were chosen for their breadth of experience and depth of knowledge.

It is worth noting that project managers almost never interact directly with reference documents. Instead, their relationship with them is mediated by their derived organisational project management processes and procedures. As a result, investigating how project managers use their organization's project management processes and procedures is a valid way to gain insight into the project manager / reference document relationship.

The interview process used an episodic approach, which asks participants to recall particular experiences or moments in order to ground their answers in their own personal experience (Mueller 2019). To address RQ1, participants were asked to recall a recent project and talk about situations where they felt it was impossible or inappropriate to use the project management processes and procedures of their organisation. They were also asked to talk about the underlying conditions they believed contributed to this situation. To address RQ2, participants were asked to talk about how they handled these situations in terms of what happened to the use of the project management processes and procedures. Participants were encouraged to talk about and justify any additional or alternative practises they used outside of their organization's project management processes and procedures.

To add more depth and nuance to the interview data (Roberts 2014; Fletcher 2017; Hoddy 2019), all interviewees took part in a 90-minute focus group session. Deidentified interview data was presented at the focus group, and participants were asked to discuss whether the data supported or contradicted their own experiences.

4.8.2 Data Analysis

Thematic: For RQ1 and RQ2, we utilize thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), due to its effectiveness in identifying patterns within qualitative data. This approach allows us to deeply explore the organizational situations and adaptive responses in public sector project management. By carefully reading and categorizing the interview transcripts, we identified recurring themes that highlighted both challenging organizational conditions that rendered project management protocols unusable or inappropriate, as well as what protocols were suspended in response to these challenges.

Derridean: To address RQ3, our examination of the data employs a Derridean lens of *différance* and deconstruction. This framework, detailed in the first column of Table 2, is particularly suited for revealing the nuanced influences of reference documents on project managers' decision-making and actions. The Derridean approach enables us to reveal the subtle, often unrecognized, ways these documents shape choices and behaviours in the public sector.

4.9 FINDINGS

Our findings are organised in order of our research questions. We begin by addressing RQ1 and describe the conditions that the reference documents were unable to address. Then, in

response to RQ2, we clarify which parts of the reference documents were affected. Finally, having applied our Derridean lens, we address RQ3. In each instance, we provide excerpts from participant transcripts, with participant aliases denoted by P# within brackets.

4.9.1 RQ1: Conditions in public organisations that are problematic for practitioner reference documents

Project managers cited numerous situations where conditions made it impossible or impractical for them to follow organisational project management processes and procedures. Through our thematic analysis we were able to group these into the four conditions. Though not every project manager faced every scenario, focus group data confirmed that many did.

4.9.1.1 Unrealistic stakeholder-imposed expectations

“if we spent anywhere near the ‘normal’ times, putting in our normal risk mitigation or just good processes, we wouldn’t have delivered on time. We just had to go without them, and take the risk, because we knew that being late would not be acceptable” (P8)

Stakeholder Urgency: The urgency from Government stakeholders to meet deadlines and deliver projects within strict timeframes creates pressures that conflict with established procedures. Government stakeholders and other decision-makers prioritize quick results, pushing project managers to find alternative approaches to expedite processes.

Unrealistic Stakeholder Expectations: Stakeholders, frequently driven by their own political objectives, demand rapid spending, approvals, and outcomes. These expectations place project managers in the pressured position of navigating the tension between meeting unrealistic stakeholder demands and adhering to formal processes, placing them in a balancing act often requires deviating from standard protocols and embracing innovative approaches to overcome challenges.

4.9.1.2 Senior stakeholders (somewhat intentionally) uninterested in their obligations

“I’ll say that it was a weak corporate executive culture with little to no appetite to follow a project management rigor. Very little appetite to involve third parties in that rigor, and the challenge for the project manager in that respect – being me – was to corral a recalcitrant corporate executive into being responsible for steering committee roles” (P5).

Inadequate Preparatory Steps: Progressing with the absence of formal project plans, budgets, and defined scopes at the project initiation stage created a foundation of uncertainty. Urgent projects that require immediate action, where there was no time for proper planning, lead to incomplete prerequisite processes, making it difficult for project managers to proceed systematically with standard procedures.

Stakeholder Obligations: The failure of senior stakeholders to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities disrupted the formal project management processes and procedures. When key stakeholders do not complete ‘necessary’ prerequisite processes, project managers faced delays, ambiguities, and conflicting priorities, which forced them to deviate from established procedures.

Insufficient Project Scoping: Inadequate project scoping or a lack of early planning activities posed additional challenges. Without clear project objectives, deliverables, and constraints, project managers struggled to execute subsequent steps effectively. This compromised the overall project management process and lead to the realisation of increased risks and unexpected costs.

Disregard for Procurement Procedures: Projects with unrealistic deadlines bypassed or disregard proper procurement processes. This occurred when time constraints override the need for comprehensive evaluation and selection of suppliers or contractors.

Lack of Stakeholder Accountability: The fulfillment of stakeholder responsibilities and accountabilities is deemed crucial for successful project management by organizational project procedures. However, the presence of a weak corporate executive culture in terms of limited project management knowledge, along with and a lack of appetite for rigorous project management practices hampered stakeholder accountability. Project managers often struggled to ensure the active participation and commitment of stakeholders in project steering committee roles.

4.9.1.3 Weak Governance Frameworks

“[we had to] give ownership to the project somewhere in the organisation, so that the steering committee with a suitable level of authority could be established to guide it, and then provide that report through to the Cabinet sub-committee, which was driving it under the Methamphetamine action plan” (P2).

Absence of Clear Governance Frameworks: Existing corporate structures fail to provide the necessary support for the formal project management procedures, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities. Multiple stakeholders and ambiguous lines of accountability further exacerbate the governance challenges. To mitigate the deficiencies in governance, project managers resort to implementing "off-procedure solutions" that bypass the existing frameworks. These alternative approaches aim to establish a suitable level of authority and guide project oversight.

Complex Stakeholder Landscape: Projects often involve multiple stakeholders with diverse interests, responsibilities, and lines of accountability. This complex stakeholder landscape can create challenges in governance, as coordination, communication, and decision-making processes become more intricate. The presence of a quasi-matrix governance arrangements, as described by participants, further exacerbates their project delivery difficulties.

4.9.1.4 The Political Dynamics

"[our department doesn't] come from a position of strength. In the project management sphere, I don't think we behave as a Central Agency. We behave as a servant. And I believe agencies are woefully unaccountable for the way they attempt to interact with us, and it has clear detriment on the quality and the value for money we deliver at times" (P3).

Power Disparity: Politics leads to an imbalance of power among departments or agencies involved in projects. This power disparity can affect the dynamics of interaction, decision-making processes, and the allocation of resources, ultimately influencing how project manager can deliver. Building effective partnerships becomes challenging when power dynamics and perceived hierarchies impede open collaboration and hinder the achievement of shared project goals.

Political Factors Trump Procedural Considerations: Political considerations take precedence over strictly following established procedures. Decisions driven by political motivations cause deviations from established protocols, which potentially undermine any of the assumed effectiveness and efficiency of any project management processes.

Selective Treatment by Ministers: Certain projects receive preferential treatment in terms of time, effort, and resources due to political factors. This selective treatment often raises concerns about fairness, consistency, and the adherence to established procedures. Ministerial expectations further influence procedural compliance, which further compromise the integrity of project management processes.

4.9.2 RQ2: Aspects of the Reference Documents that are Unenforced or Suspended

The study participants described that the following features of the reference documents are necessarily unenforced, set aside, or suspended to deal with the conditions revealed by RQ1. These range from the documentation of approvals to procurement and the management of risk and change.

4.9.2.1 Abandon Documentation Approvals

“the ability to actually document decisions [does not always occur], so a lot of the time things are said on the fly, things are agreed to in meetings [without subsequent approval]” (P4)

From the data it is apparent that the senior management of these public sector organisations often lack knowledge of project processes and procedures, which was acknowledged by participants as a form of learned ignorance. This lack of understanding affects the documentation of approvals, where formal written approvals are expected by the procedures but not always given priority in practice. Instead, verbal approvals were used, and decisions are made on the fly or agreed upon in meetings without proper subsequent approval and documentation. Participants highlighted the frequent absence of documented decisions and the reliance on informal agreements.

4.9.2.2 Abandon Project Planning

“[the project] started off as a simple project, and then it grew legs without having the forethought or the planning in place as to what the impact of all this work was going to be” (P7)

Particularly related to the tight delivery timeframes is the diminished quality or entire omission of project planning processes. In one situation, a project started without proper forethought or planning, leading to unforeseen impacts that had to be dealt with. Another example involves the purchase of an ICT system from another jurisdiction without

conducting formal analysis or comprehensive option comparison tasks that should have been part of the project planning process. These cases, and many others, highlight the challenges posed by time constraints in ensuring thorough project planning took place.

4.9.2.3 Abandoned Procurement and Contract Processes

"base level processes that you have to adhere to... I mean I don't have a problem with tinkering with the tender process" (P8).

Organisational procurement and contract processes are often bypassed or adapted due to the unique conditions in the public sector. For instance, participants mentioned streamlining procurement for small projects by using simplified templates or email-based engagements instead of the extensive formal procedures. Again, urgency and time constraints often led to cases where procurement and contracts were initiated without proper approval. These deviations from standard practice in procurement were regarded as common and accepted, with participants acknowledging that the only option was to depart from established procedures. Some participants viewed procurement processes as an 'ideal' baseline requirements, which is open to adjustments and modifications to suit specific project needs.

4.9.2.4 Abandoned Stakeholder Planning

"not all the stakeholders had been engaged, which obviously caused the whole rack of different problems for different reasons" (P4)

Public sector organizations face challenges that go beyond technical processes like procurement and contracts. The transcripts suggest that even stakeholder planning, identification, analysis, and management are overlooked or neglected. It was mentioned that incomplete stakeholder engagement frequently led to various issues when a project was transferred from one person to another.

4.9.2.5 Abandoned Risk and Change Management

"[we had to go without] putting in our normal risk mitigation or just good processes... and take the risk because we knew that being late would not be acceptable" (P3)

Processes for managing risk and change are abandoned to meet strict (unrealistic) deadlines. Frequently, standard procedures and risk mitigation techniques are forgone to avoid delays. In a similar vein, change management procedures were dropped, and adjustments were made outside of accepted practises to win over stakeholders and safeguard the public sector

organization's reputation. In actuality, project managers had to be more concerned with prioritising urgent emergent matters and acting quickly to avoid any potential long-term harm to the department's reputation than they were with planning for risk or change.

4.9.3 RQ3: Drawing insights from the findings of RQ1 and RQ2, what can be revealed about the relationship between public organization project managers and their reference documents?

Table 2: Summary of Derridean lens components and RQ3 findings.

Derridean lens Component	Summary	RQ3 findings	Example Quotes
1. A Structure of the Present	- The past and future are interconnected within the present. - We experience the present as an internalised narrative, influenced by both past actions (retention) and future possibilities (protention). - Our selective attention determines what is relevant to us in shaping our experience of the present. - The interplay of retention and protention creates tension, compelling us to shape what is retended towards desired future outcomes.	- Strategic necessity requires the deliberate suspension or deviation from a project management system to steer project work towards an envisioned future. - This deliberate move "opens a space" for experimentation, imagination, and innovative solutions by temporarily setting aside organizational processes. - Within defined boundaries, project teams have the opportunity to transcend rigid structures and explore novel ideas, while considering the interplay between past actions and future possibilities. - Through this intentional suspension, project managers selectively attend to what is relevant in the present, shaping retended elements towards desired outcomes.	"What you do is you bend the system as far as you possibly can, but you don't break it. And if you push the boundaries to the absolute max and the only way you can do that is by understanding the system. If you understand the system, you can manipulate it and get it to do what you need it to do." [P7]
2. A Framing of Now	- Our perception of Now is framed by a reference point with duration. - Our articulation of now includes negation and absencing relationships to a completed, idealized version of itself. - Unlike the present, now incorporates a reflective component that helps us orient ourselves towards a reference point or ideal.	- Project managers orient themselves by using project lifecycle terms, consequently positioning recalled 'now' moments within a wider temporal framework. - Project managers engage in reflective thinking by referencing the ideal state of project management processes. This framing of now moments within a fixed duration acknowledges its connection to a reference point anchored to an ideal.	"We had to take a step back and re-evaluate our approach. We looked at the project lifecycle and identified areas where we could improve our processes and procedures." [P5]

3. Creation of Binary Opposition and Hierarchies	• Binaries such as Scope vs. Constraint, Innovation vs. Stability, Flexibility vs. Control, play a crucial role in influencing our perception and interpretation of reality. • Binaries create tensions within us, igniting a desire for resolution, force us to make decisions, and push us towards action. • Binaries lead to hierarchies, as one element often assumes superiority over the other.	• Project managers navigate complex decision-making by engaging with binary structures that contain inherent tensions and conflicts, such as time/quality, cost/scope, risk/opportunity, stakeholder satisfaction/project constraints, innovation/compliance, and autonomy/collaboration. • These binary structures and hierarchies shape their actions and roles, as they strive to resolve tensions and conflicts by carefully weighing trade-offs, prioritizing tasks, and generating creative solutions, resulting in a sense of satisfaction and progress.	"We had to balance the need for innovation with the need for compliance. We had to find creative solutions that met the requirements of the project while also pushing the boundaries of what was possible." [P9]
4. Negation and Absencing	• Negation and absence are integral to our perception and interpretation of reality. • Negation shapes our perception by defining objects through their opposite qualities. • Absencing shapes our perception by contrasting objects to related but absent entities.	• Instances of negation and absencing are measured against the ideals outlined in project reference documents, allowing project managers to assess and interpret project situations. • Negation is utilized to articulate when certain processes cannot be strictly followed, while absencing is used when alternative approaches deviate from established processes, say for example procurement approvals.	"... a normal process would be to have your scope and your documentation, have some level of client approval to ensure you're going to the market with what you want, we didn't have that luxury." [P3]
5. Ideals as references	• Despite their inherent flaws and internal contradictions, ideals shape our perception of what is desirable and worthwhile. • Ideals serve as motivational forces, driving us to pursue improvement. • Ideals stimulate reflection and self-evaluation, encouraging us to assess our progress against them.	• Project managers' perception of their current organizational context, project management processes, risk management practices, and stakeholder engagement strategies is deeply influenced by project management ideals. • These ideals serve as strong motivators, shaping their understanding of what is desirable and worthwhile. • Despite recognizing the inherent flaws and contradictions within these ideals, participants draw inspiration from them, engaging in reflection to evaluate their progress in relation to these ideals.	I think part of the reason it's hard, and it depends on what school of project management you graduated from, but the one of the things that strikes me is when you start talking about stakeholders and roles, it seems like the only people that the rigor is applied to is us ... we've got to do everything were supposed to do and they can roll along and just do whatever they feel like doing" [P8]

6. Interconnectedness and Contextuality	• The present and the now are complex interconnected differences, signs, and signifiers. • The dynamic interplay of these elements within various contexts shapes meaning-making.	• Project managers perceive their current situation within broader contexts, including organizational culture, procurement procedures, risk management practices, and stakeholder engagement strategies. • They recognize that comprehending the complexity and dynamics of their situation entails considering the interplay and interaction of different elements, which contributes to the generation of meaning and understanding.	"I suppose one of the frustrating things for me is probably the, the lack of understanding from government agencies about government tendering policies in general...I suppose the biggest issue that we have is 'buy local' comes into a lot of the projects that we're doing." [P1]
7. Signification and Meaning	• Our emphasis on the ideal eclipses the process of différance. • This eclipsing hinders our understanding of the true significance and meaning of the present. • Therefore, fixation on the now eclipses our perception of the present.	• Project managers' reflections and adaptations in response to suspended project management processes highlight the inherent tensions between the ideal and their lived reality. • While participants demonstrate their unconscious accessibility to the reality of their situation through their successful actions, their fixation on the ideal hampers their ability to fully articulate and describe their lived experience.	"I think the biggest challenge is the fact that we're dealing with public money and the public has a right to know what we're doing with their money. And I think that's where the tension comes in, because we're trying to deliver a project, but we're also trying to be transparent and accountable to the public. And sometimes those two things don't always align." [P4]
8. The flux of meaning	• The meaning of the past, present, and future is in constant flux. • Meaning is shaped by new information, changing circumstances, and evolving perspectives. • Absolute meaning always deferred and subject to continual reinterpretation.	• When project managers reflect on specific circumstances within public organizations that challenge the integrity of organizational project management processes, this prompts them to reevaluate their own perceptions of the situation. • They emphasize the importance of adaptability and openness to change, and recognize that the meaning they attributed to past, present, and future outcomes is not fixed but constantly subject to reinterpretation.	"How you get there doesn't matter. Yeah. Now – you can go get a stakeholder that goes and throws an obstacle in your way. If you can challenge that obstacle or you could actually find a way around it to deliver, to meet what they want. Then all the better". [P8]
9. Natural Metaphysics or Deconstruction	• Our innate drive to generate new ideas and inventions stems from our quest to understand and navigate reality. • Experts, acting as deconstructionists, possess an intuitive understanding of their work.	• Project managers adopt a deconstructionist perspective by recognizing that the intricate nature of reality rarely aligns with rigid project management systems. • They embrace their innate understanding of reality and flexibly adapt their approach to navigate complex situations.	"Yeah, I think it's the challenge of it. I think it's the fact that you're always trying to solve a problem. And I think that's what drives me, is that I like solving problems. And I like the fact that every project is different. And you're always learning something new." [P5]

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• They operate in the present, transcending established assumptions, norms, and hierarchies.• Experts continuously construct and shape the future, incorporating the necessary possibilities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• By temporarily suspending certain organizational project management systems, they create a space for critical reflection and re-evaluation of underlying assumptions.• Project managers enjoy exploring unconventional approaches and uncovering new possibilities, driven by their inherent desire to solve project problems. |
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4.10 DISCUSSION

The increasing adoption of project management methodologies within public organizations, a trend known as projectification, has ignited a scholarly debate on its effects on bureaucratic structures in the public sector. This debate oscillates between concerns about fragmentation and job insecurity, and assertions of enhanced flexibility and productivity in bureaucratic systems (refer Sec. **Error! Reference source not found.**). While project management reference documents significantly shape the identity and credibility of the project management profession, they are also subject to academic criticism for their theoretical and practical limitations.

Despite these critiques, our findings, through the responses to RQ1 and RQ2, reveal that practitioners recognize the necessity of these documents but also the need for situation-specific customization. This often involves the suspension of certain protocols, highlighting the importance of a contingency approach that considers the unique context and dynamic factors of each project (refer Sec. **Error! Reference source not found.**). Our research contributes to this discourse by reconciling these viewpoints and uncovering the dialectical nature of reference documents.

Our discussion weaves together four interconnected themes, each delving into different aspects of the relationship between public sector project managers and reference documents. First, we explore how these documents create a legitimate and authoritative present for project managers, affirming their professional practices and decisions. Next, we examine the authority these documents provide to project managers, enabling them to deconstruct and reinterpret project management protocols for specific project needs. We then discuss the role of these documents in shaping and safeguarding the present and future conditions of projects, ensuring adaptability to evolving project conditions. Finally, we synthesize these elements to deconstruct the dialectical nature of public sector project work, highlighting the balance project managers maintain between adherence to theoretical principles and practical project demands.

4.11 REFERENCE DOCUMENTS CREATE A LEGITIMATE PRESENT FOR PROJECT MANAGERS

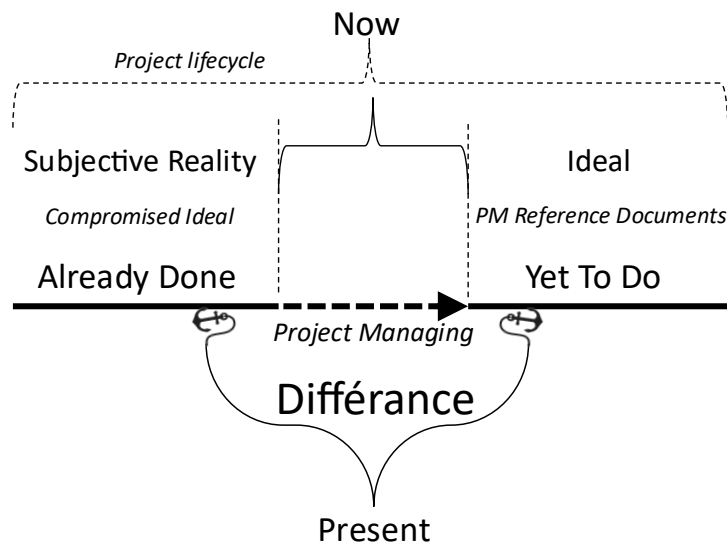


Figure 3: The ideal (project management reference documents) anchors the situation for explanation, while différance eclipses project managing from explanation

Figure 3 aims to provide insight into how public sector project managers frame their statements about project episodes, both current and previous, within the context of compromised or incomplete project management ideals. Notably, when discussing completed aspects of a project, our findings show (Table 2) that they tend to emphasize what was not done or what was missing, drawing attention to the deviations from the ideal reference documents on which their organization's project management processes and procedures are based. This observation suggests that project managers' reflections and evaluations are heavily influenced by these deviations, underscoring the significance of the ideals in their perception and assessment of their actions and project outcomes.

The act of project managing serves as the bridge between their subjective impression of reality and the ideal towards which they strive. Within this gap, where the present moment resides and where the necessary actions can be executed, the actual execution of the project, the project managing, is eclipsed from a comprehensive explanation due to the presence of différance, which is a force that compels practitioners to interpret their own actions and the actions of others in the context of reference document principles, as well as their organization's specific project management processes based on these documents.

4.12 REFERENCE DOCUMENTS CREATE AUTHORITY FOR PROJECT DECONSTRUCTION (PROJECT MANAGING)

We argue that there are intriguing parallels between Derrida's notion of justice *is* deconstruction and the concept of project management *is* deconstruction, in which project managers temporarily suspend the rigid principles of the project management reference documents. Within public sector organisations, project management has become an integral component of the projectification process, necessitating the development of institutional infrastructure to support it. It is essential to recognise that the reference documents (such as MSP/APMBOK) do not perfectly align with every situation, despite the widespread perception of project management's inherent value. Nonetheless, this misalignment becomes essential to public sector project delivery because it enables project managers to exercise their expert judgement and make informed decisions while receiving support from senior management.

While our findings concur that project management is the process of overcoming hindrances and obstacles to project delivery capability (van der Hoorn, B. & Whitty, S. J. 2016), we additionally observe that it is precisely these hindrances that create the opportunity for project managing to occur. Participants emphasised the need for a "level of discretion" and an "option to depart from standard practise" (P3) to effectively address the unique requirements and obstacles of each project. Consequently, project managing in the public sector becomes possible when the situation deviates from the prescriptive nature of the reference documents, echoing Derrida's notion of justice as a continuous process of deconstruction.

By recognising that project managing *is* deconstruction, we acknowledge its dynamic and fluid nature. It also highlights the importance of a critical engagement with the language of the reference documents, encouraging all project managers to question and reinterpret the principles of these documents, and to trust their expertise to effectively navigate the complexities and uncertainties that their projects entail.

4.13 PROTECTING NECESSARY FUTURE CONDITIONS

Project managing then, as deconstruction, is an act of responding to and grappling with the actual, and reveals itself to project managers as a complex interplay of feelings, actions, and comportments, as they confront and overcome obstacles and hindrances that hinder the effective delivery of project work (van der Hoorn & Whitty 2019).

However, our findings argue that project managing in the public sector is a force, a momentum of the project manager, driven by them, that continuously questions and challenges the artificial dichotomies imposed by bureaucratic and project management processes. Moreover, project managing encompasses elements of protention, which involves two vital components. Firstly, it entails seizing and nurturing opportunities to create future conditions that will facilitate necessary actions, even when stakeholders are unaware of these future needs. Secondly, it involves safeguarding necessary retended conditions that may be at risk of being undermined due to senior management's lack of project awareness. Both of these components are evidenced in Table 2.

4.14 DECONSTRUCTING THE DIALECTICAL NATURE OF PUBLIC SECTOR PROJECT WORK: NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY AND EMBRACING NUANCE

Reading the transcripts of our participants as they recount past project episodes (nows), one might initially perceive them as constantly oscillating between binary oppositions such as plan versus chaos or threat versus opportunity. However, a Derridean perspective reveals a deeper truth: these public sector project managers are engaged in a continuous process of deconstructing these binaries to confront the intricate actuality of each hindering situation they encounter.

Rather than being confined by rigid either-or choices, these project managers actively dismantle and transcend binary oppositions and hierarchical power structures by their actions. Their project managing extends beyond simply reconciling dichotomies because they must suspend bureaucratic and project management conventions in order to navigate complexity and delve into the nuanced aspects of their project.

Through the lens of Derridean philosophy, we gain a more profound understanding of the public sector project managers' journey. It becomes apparent that their role entails constant engagement with the multifaceted present nature of projects, surpassing the limitations imposed by binary thinking. This recognition highlights their ability and desire to deconstruct and navigate ambiguity, embrace uncertainty, and adapt their approach to align with the intricacies of each unique project.

4.15 CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study enhances our understanding of project managing in the public sector, focusing on the role of reference documents, language, and hierarchies. It proposes a deconstructive theory of project managing, exploring the dialectical relationship between project managers and their work. This approach emphasizes the significance of reference documents in shaping project manager authority and autonomy, and the interplay between current actions and future planning. The study also highlights the need to evolve these documents for better alignment with public sector realities and invites examination of the ethical dimensions within this context.

4.15.1 Contributions to Theory

This study contributes to theory by presenting project managing as occurring at a metastructural level, a form of deconstruction, and by proposing a deconstructive theory of project managing. This theory, while requiring further exploration, recognises the dialectical relationship between public sector project managers and their project work. It reflects on how the project manager's articulation of the work is shaped by the language of the reference documents, and yet, their actions in the present of the project must often transcend these documents. Therefore, this theory contemplates the significance of these documents in creating the authority and autonomy of the project manager.

A deconstructive theory of project managing would also explore the intricate relationship between project managing actions in the present and futurity (protention). Our findings illustrate how public sector project managers focus on present actions: protecting existing conditions and shaping them to foster future actions, while safeguarding against potential threats.

Investigating the linguistic characteristics and signifying structures of project management reference documents is another aspect our theory opens up. This analysis, which in a way has begun (McGrath 2018), aims to understand how language shapes meaning, influences the identities of project managers, and perpetuates hierarchical power structures.

4.15.2 Practical Implications

The research points towards practical implications by encouraging the evolution of project management reference documents to better align with public sector project managing. It is

vital to balance the guidance provided by these documents to preserve practitioner autonomy while maintaining their credibility and trust.

Finally, our study highlights the ethical dimensions of project managing and the role of public sector project managers within the socio-political context. It invites an exploration of how project managers navigate ethical dilemmas and responsibilities within the constraints imposed by reference documents

4.16 CONCLUSION

Some argue that public sector projects continue to fail to meet delivery expectations and that more project managing experience is required rather than more project management (Gomes, Yasin & Lisboa 2008; Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). We conducted semi-structured interviews and a focus group with nine senior and experienced project managers from the Australian public sector. Our findings, analysed through a Derridean lens, offer a distinct perspective compared to conventional project management theories. This lens helped us understand the paradoxical relationship between these project managers and the foundational reference documents for organizational processes. Unlike traditional frameworks that may overlook such paradoxes, the Derridean approach reveals the dynamic and often contradictory nature of these relationships.

Our research demonstrates how public sector project managers navigate these contradictions, balancing the need for adherence to formal protocols with the flexibility required for practical project delivery. This balance is crucial in legitimizing the role of the project manager while allowing for the exercise of expert judgment and autonomy. In contrast to other lenses, which might simplify these dynamics, our Derridean approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between structure and agency in project managing.

By advocating for a deconstructive theory of project managing, we respond to the 'so what?' question by highlighting the practical and theoretical significance of understanding project managing as a fluid and evolving practice. Our theory, drawing parallels with Derrida's views on Law and Justice, sees project management reference documents as a treaty-like framework conferring authority and autonomy to project managers.

While acknowledging the limitations of our study, such as the small sample size, we emphasize the value of our approach in opening new avenues for understanding and practicing project managing in public sector contexts.

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare. In addition, this study has received human ethics approval from the UniSQ Human Research Ethics Committee as per approved application number ETH2023-0542.

The Projectified Life



Use, Manipulate, Circumvent, or Suffer.
Project managing in the public sector
means navigating bureaucracy one
intuitive judgment call at a time .

Plate 2: I Am the Compass of Pragmatic Comportment

PLATE 2 ILLUSTRATION

Plate 2: I Am the Compass of Pragmatic Comportment visualises the central insight of Chapter 5, which introduces the Pragmatic Comportment Compass as a way of understanding how public sector project managers interact with formal methodologies. The image presents a suited figure surrounded by mountains of policy documents, holding the PMBOK Guide. However, instead of a human head, the figure has a compass. This compass does not point north, but rather to four strategic orientations: Use, Manipulate, Circumvent, and Suffer.

These four directions represent the core comportments described in Chapter 5. They are not fixed roles or categories but lived dispositions that shift according to context. Project managers may use formal methodologies as intended, manipulate them for situational advantage, circumvent them when they obstruct outcomes, or suffer under their constraints when no alternative is viable. The compass imagery captures this orientation of the self within a world of institutional structure and constraint.

Surrounding the figure are neatly bundled documents labelled with familiar project management standards and policies. Their sheer volume represents the bureaucratic landscape in which project managers operate. While these documents are heavy and overwhelming, the compass suggests agency. The figure is not buried by the paper but oriented within it, using their discretion to navigate.

This Plate highlights the thesis argument that project managers are not passive recipients of methodology. They are pragmatic actors who negotiate their relationship with reference documents based on situational judgement. The compass as a head reinforces that this negotiation is cognitive, felt, ethical, and professional. Identity is shaped not by rigid adherence, but by the orientation one takes toward structure in the face of complexity.

Overall, Plate 2 presents a symbolic articulation of the Pragmatic Comportment Compass. It frames project managing as a constant act of orientation within systems that both support and constrain. The compass is not external. It is internalised as part of the practitioner's identity, representing the judgment and discretion required to manage projects in the real world.

CHAPTER 5: THE PRAGMATIC COMPORTMENT COMPASS: RETHINKING PROJECTIFICATION IN PUBLIC SECTOR PROJECTS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the full manuscript for the second peer reviewed paper developed as part of this doctoral research (Study 2). This paper took the form of a case study and is titled *The Pragmatic Comportment Compass: Rethinking Projectification in Public Sector Projects*. It is published in *Project Leadership and Society*.

5.2 KEY RELEVANCE TO THIS THESIS

- Chapter 5 describes the decision-making processes of public sector project managers in the coalface of project delivery
- This study outlines how public sector project managers navigate public sector conditions to enable project delivery whilst not completely depending on project management processes
- It indicates that project managers hold competencies that stretch further past those of the project management industry and discipline.

5.3 CITATION AND CO-AUTHOR DETAILS

Table 3: Citation Details of Original Chapter 5 Publication

Citation Details	Rowe, K. M., Whitty, S. J., & van der Hoorn, B. (2024). The Pragmatic Comportment Compass: Rethinking projectification in public sector projects. <i>Project Leadership and Society</i> , 100152.
Writing	Kevan Michael Rowe (80%) Dr S. Jon Whitty (10%) Dr Anita Wheeldon (10%)
Data Collection and Analysis	Kevan Michael Rowe (100%)
Quality Review	Kevan Michael Rowe (80%) Dr S. Jon Whitty (10%) Dr Anita Wheeldon (10%)

5.4 ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between public sector project managers and their organizations' formal project management processes. Utilizing Heidegger's concept of 'practical comportment,' we develop the 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass,' which identifies four primary modes of this relationship: to use, manipulate, circumvent, and suffer. Based on qualitative data from a focus group of nine experienced project managers in the Australian state government, our findings reveal a tendency to prioritize the public good over strict protocol adherence. This results in adaptive strategies that respond effectively to complex public service realities, ensuring project progress. Our findings challenge the conventional definition of projectification, proposing an alternative that emphasizes the importance of discretion and strategic flexibility. We align this alternative with the principles of street-level bureaucracy and contingency theory, highlighting the necessity for situational responsiveness and resilience in navigating the bureaucratic and procedural obstacles inherent in public sector projects.

Key words: Public Sector, Projectification, Heideggerian Theory, Practical Comportment, Street-level Bureaucracy, Contingency Theory

5.5 INTRODUCTION

Public sector project managers often face a critical decision: whether to adhere to formal organizational protocols or adopt pragmatic alternatives when challenging circumstances threaten project progress. This decision represents a shift from methodology-driven processes amidst the growing trend of 'projectification' within public organizations—a strategy aimed at de-bureaucratization through frameworks like PRINCE2 and PMBOK®. However, the impact of projectification on public sector projects is questionable, as managers' behaviours suggest that increased projectification doesn't necessarily lead to better outcomes.

This study does not advocate for abandoning processes like PRINCE2 and PMBOK®, which are widely used and form the basis for many institutional protocols. Instead, it seeks to understand how—and why—public sector managers engage with these frameworks. While these processes serve as starting points, the unique challenges in the public sector often require adaptation or divergence. To navigate these challenges, project managers employ strategies such as modifying formal processes, prioritizing critical tasks over procedural adherence, and leveraging tacit knowledge from experience. This research explores these

strategies, aiming to uncover the balance between adhering to established frameworks and the flexibility needed to meet specific project demands. The goal is not to reject formal processes but to understand their real-world application and adaptation.

The literature both praises and critiques adherence to formal processes, reflecting the evolving nature of project management in public organizations (Schoper 2018; Fred & Mukhtar-Landgren 2019; McGrath & Whitty 2019; Müller 2019). Audits and reports reveal both non-conformance and successful project deliveries, suggesting a complex relationship between protocol adherence and outcomes. Despite this, there's a limited understanding of the practical realities managers face in public projects, particularly the operational support needed to navigate challenges and ensure progress. The nuanced decision-making during project phases, and its impact on outcomes, remains under-researched.

Recent scholarship, such as Scott (2023), posits that public sector project cycles operate as complex systems involving multiple actors who must cooperate under heterogeneous conditions shaped by power relations. However, the mechanisms through which decisions are made to foster cooperation among these actors remain largely unexplored. Similarly, Godenhjelm (2023) highlights that contemporary political-administrative systems are characterized by a complex ecology of actors with diverse beliefs, principles, and resources. Understanding how these actors make decisions to produce public services and influence policy outcomes through project management is crucial. These gaps raise profound questions about the actual challenges faced by project managers and the decisions they make to initiate and sustain project work.

Despite recent extensive discussions in the literature (e.g., Meier 2019; Rippon et al. 2021; Fred & Godenhjelm 2023; Jensen 2023), significant gaps remain in our understanding of how public sector project managers navigate the delivery of projects amidst numerous challenges. While existing studies have explored the implementation of project management methodologies and their outcomes, they often overlook the nuanced decision-making processes that project managers employ when facing complex political environments, maintaining cooperation with difficult stakeholders, and managing the pressures associated with budgetary constraints, ethical standards, and urgent public demands (Flyvbjerg 2009). Specifically, there is limited understanding of how project managers balance adherence to formal processes with the need to adapt to the unique demands of their organizational contexts. This study addresses this critical gap by examining the factors that influence these

decisions, particularly in the context of increasing 'projectification' in public sector organizations. While public sector officials have endorsed projectification as a means of improving efficiency (Fred & Hall 2017), the frequent decisions by project managers to circumvent formal processes suggest that, in practice, projectification may often pose more of an obstacle than an aid in public project delivery. Understanding these decision-making processes is essential for refining project management practices and improving outcomes in the public sector.

To enhance our understanding of these issues, our study utilizes Heidegger's concept of 'practical comportment' as a philosophical framework to examine the instinctive, everyday actions and decision-making processes of public-sector project managers. This framework is particularly relevant because it addresses how individuals orient themselves and cope with daily tasks, making it a suitable lens for exploring the practical realities faced by project managers. Moreover, this concept is ideal for analysing the behavioural patterns of social actors with power and decision-making capacities, enabling an exploration of whether they cognitively align themselves with organizational processes or adopt alternative rationales in executing decisions and making sound judgments.

The decision to follow or diverge from formal project management processes is a critical one, especially in the public sector, where managers must balance compliance with the flexibility needed to respond to complex and often unpredictable challenges. This decision can have significant consequences: strict adherence to processes may ensure compliance but could lead to inefficiencies or a failure to meet project goals in dynamic environments, while diverging from these processes allows for adaptability but risks non-compliance and potential project failure. Heidegger's concept captures the tacit knowledge and instinctive behaviours that inform these decisions (Dreyfus 1990), offering a profound understanding of how project managers engage with and navigate their project environments. Our study builds on the work of van der Hoorn and Whitty (2019) who applied this concept and demonstrated that tacit aspects of project managing are critical to project success. Thus, we aim to uncover how the practical comportment of public sector project managers influences their relationship with formal project management processes, particularly in making the crucial decision to adhere to or deviate from established protocols.

Our central research question is: *What factors influence public sector project managers' decisions to follow or diverge from their organization's formal project management processes, and how can their comportment towards these processes be characterized?* Public Service Organizations must rapidly respond to societal and fiscal demands, requiring project managers to be dynamic in ensuring continuity of services. Therefore, the research question seeks to understand the actions taken by public sector project managers. To address this question, we conducted a qualitative analysis based on data from a focus group of nine experienced Australian state government project managers. This approach explores the internal and external factors that impact these managers, requiring them to balance the demands of formal project management processes with the practical realities of their roles. Ultimately, this method allows us to interpret and characterize the comportments of project managers as they navigate complex public sector work environments that include formal project management protocols.

While this study engages with multiple theoretical frameworks, the primary theoretical lens guiding our analysis is Heidegger's concept of 'practical comportment.' This perspective forms the foundation of our 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass,' which is crucial for understanding the discretionary behaviours and adaptive strategies employed by public sector project managers. Street-level bureaucracy and contingency theory are introduced to show how, through this study, practical comportment resonates with these established frameworks. These supplementary theories provide contextual insights that enrich and complement the practical comportment perspective, offering a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of how project managers navigate formal processes while adapting to the specific demands and challenges of their organizational environments.

This research advances our understanding of public sector project management by challenging prevailing norms regarding the needs and operational realities faced by these project managers. Our findings indicate that, contrary to the dominant focus on project management methodologies derived from standardized policies and procedures, public sector project managers require greater authority and autonomy to make context-specific decisions, without entirely abandoning established project processes. This decision-making includes whether to use, manipulate, circumvent, or suffer and endure their formal project management processes. We introduce the "Pragmatic Comportment Compass" as a

conceptual tool to encapsulate this decision-making process, aligning public sector project management theory with the principles of street-level bureaucracy and contingency theory.

Street-level bureaucracy theory highlights that the use of the Compass is integral to the role of a public sector project manager—serving not as an indication of noncompliance or inefficiency, but as a necessity for adapting to complex and varied circumstances.

Contingency theory further explains how adapting project management practices 'on the fly' is how public sector organizations flex, adapt, and effectively respond to diverse client needs on a case-by-case basis.

Our research also contributes to projectification theory by advocating for a redefinition of its core concepts. The prevailing definition of projectification is inherently normative, implying that increasing the adoption of reference document-derived processes—such as those from PRINCE2 and PMBOK®—automatically enhances project delivery effectiveness. However, our findings challenge this assumption, revealing that greater reliance on these formalized processes does not necessarily lead to better project outcomes; in some instances, bypassing them can be more effective.

Our study suggests that projectification has been misunderstood. Rather than merely shifting the burden of project delivery from bureaucratic processes to supposedly more efficient project-based processes, our findings indicate that, operationally, projectification can empower project managers by granting them the discretion to apply their professional expertise and judgment. This includes the flexibility to deviate from—or even outright reject—formal project management processes when necessary. This nuanced view of projectification emphasizes the facilitation of project manager discretion rather than its limitation, enabling public sector project managers to do what is necessary to meet the specific needs and contexts of their projects.

5.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

5.6.1 The Projectification of the Public Sector

The 'projectification' trend has increasingly influenced public sector organisations (Fred & Godenhjelm 2023). Projectification refers to the growing use of project-based methods and tools within government entities (Hodgson et al. 2019; Jensen 2023). Global evidence indicates that public sector organisations are aligning their operational paradigms with project management methodologies (Schoper 2018). Techniques and tools from 'reference

documents' like PRINCE2 and the PMBOK® Guide have been integrated into their project management processes (McGrath & Whitty 2019; Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024).

For example, Australian state government websites detail the use of project control boards, the role of Senior Responsible Owners, and the use of Project Status Reports (Tasmanian Government 2011; State of Victoria 2019; State of Western Australia 2019). Project management reference documents form the backbone of many government training programs in Australia (Australian Federal Government 2008; State of Western Australia 2012; State of Victoria 2018; Australian Federal Government 2021; State of New South Wales 2021) as well as in European and American public organisations (U.S Department of Energy 2015; United Kingdom Government 2021).

Academic interest has particularly focused on the trend towards projectification in the European Union (EU) (Lundin 2011; Fred 2015; Jałocha 2019; Fred 2020). In Sweden's public sector, especially in local government dealings with EU project funding, projectification involves specific agents, techniques, and tools (Fred & Mukhtar-Landgren 2019). Agents include local governments, civil servants, and consultants adapting project management methodologies. Techniques involve soft governing, using voluntary participation, and vague goals to allow local flexibility. Tools include EU funding, incentivizing the adoption of project management and supporting infrastructures like training, and consultancy services. These elements facilitate the integration of project managing practices into local government, adapting to local conditions.

The debate on projectification's impact on public sector structure and operation is twofold: some argue it solidifies bureaucracy (Fred 2020; Mukhtar-Landgren 2021), while others contend it fosters decentralization and adopts a more agile, innovative approach, disrupting bureaucracy (Clegg 1990; Donnellon & Heckscher 1994). This disruption is often likened to the flexibility in the private sector (Sjöblom, Löfgren & Godenhjelm 2013; Hodgson et al. 2019). It's crucial to note that these discussions about disrupting bureaucracy through projectification refer to decision-making processes and organizational structures, not to public sector project managers' discretion over formal protocols. Despite these debates, the time-bound and result-oriented nature of projects generally finds favour among public sector officials (Fred & Hall 2017).

Criticisms of projectification persist. Concerns include potential organizational fragmentation, jeopardizing service coordination and continuity (Edelenbos & Klijn 2009; Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015). In Slovenia, projectification has affected job security and professional status, impacting public sector employment stability (Greer, Samaluk & Umney 2019). In America and Sweden, the anticipated decentralization benefits have been met with scepticism, challenging its efficiency (Andersson 2009; Fred & Hall 2017; Munck Af Rosenschöld & Wolf 2017). A critical issue is whether an overemphasis on rigid methodologies leads to moral blindness, obscuring the foundational public service goal of delivering tangible benefits under the guise of efficiency.

Researchers have highlighted the risks of excessive reliance on standardized reference documents for projectification in the public sector (Godenhjelm & Fred 2023). The disparity between public and private sector dynamics poses significant challenges in uniformly applying project management frameworks like PRINCE2. Health researchers trained under PRINCE2 report a disconnect between the bureaucratic language of project management and their core professional identity centred on human care.

5.6.2 The Influence of Reference Documents

Historically, the PMBOK® Guide has been a pivotal force in defining the professional identity of project managers since its inception in the mid-1980s. Recognized for its significant role in shaping managerial paradigms globally, it continues to be a cornerstone in the field (Curling 1995; Lundin & Söderholm 1995). Today, the influence of the PMBOK® Guide, along with other key reference documents such as PRINCE2, is profound and enduring, impacting the practices and frameworks of project management worldwide (Morris et al. 2006; Blomquist, Farashah & Thomas 2018). This is evidenced by the substantial number of certifications issued: over one million project managers have attained Project Management Professional (PMP) status (Project Management Institute 2021b), with a similar number certified in PRINCE2 (PRINCE2 2021).

In recent years, Agile Project Management (Agile) has gained popularity, particularly within the technology industry, due to its structured yet flexible approach, which contrasts with the more rigid frameworks of PMBOK® and PRINCE2. Agile's iterative process allows teams to reassess and adapt at the end of each project cycle before moving forward, thus providing a higher degree of flexibility in managing change (Masood & Farooq 2017). While Agile's emphasis on adaptability and responsiveness aligns with the concept of practical

comportment, this study focuses on understanding how public sector project managers navigate the unique challenges of adhering to more formalized, process-driven frameworks like PMBOK® and PRINCE2. The goal is not to advocate for a shift towards Agile methodologies but to explore how managers balance the need for flexibility within the constraints of established project management practices.

These reference documents heavily influence the project management community. Scholars note that project managers often establish their professional credibility and secure their career standing through certifications and affiliations with professional associations that endorse these frameworks. Nonetheless, despite their widespread influence, these documents are not immune to scrutiny. Concerns have been raised about their suitability, particularly in the public sector (McGrath & Whitty 2020a). The growing criticism of ‘projectification’ of public organisations stemming from these reference documents is consistent with a broader, long-standing critique found in the project management literature.

5.6.3 Criticisms of Reference Documents

Scholars have raised significant concerns about the theoretical foundations and practical relevance of project management reference documents like the PMBOK® Guide. These documents are often criticized for their self-referential nature and lack of coherence, creating a gap between prescribed practices and the realities of project management (Morris et al. 2006; Svejvig & Andersen 2015). The theoretical bases of these frameworks appear fragmented or absent (Smyth & Morris 2007; Shepherd & Atkinson 2011), and their practical applications frequently fail to capture the complexities and uncertainties inherent in project management, particularly in the public sector (Davies & Brady 2016; Kiridena & Sense 2016).

Recent empirical research shows that public sector project managers frequently diverge from strict protocols, finding a balance between the necessity of authoritative direction and the flexibility needed to manage projects effectively in complex bureaucratic environments (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024). This pragmatic approach highlights the limitations of protocols derived from reference documents, particularly in addressing the socio-political aspects of projects. Public sector project managers are adopting more context-aware methods to better meet public sector needs. However, the specific strategies they use remain unclear, indicating an area for further investigation.

5.6.4 Contingency Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy

In response to the limitations and criticisms of formal project management methodologies, both Contingency Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy offer valuable perspectives on the variability in adherence to formal processes among public sector project managers.

Contingency Theory emphasizes the importance of context-dependent decision-making, advocating for adaptive management practices and responsive leadership to effectively navigate the complexities inherent in public sector environments (van der Hoek, Groeneveld & Beerkens 2021). This theory is particularly pertinent in unpredictable settings, where flexible decision-making is essential for ensuring effective governance.

In contrast, Street-Level Bureaucracy highlights the discretionary power of frontline public service workers, emphasizing how factors like resource constraints and organizational culture shape their decision-making (Hand & Catlaw 2019). This theory helps explain the practical deviations from standard procedures that often occur as public sector workers engage directly with policies, frequently modifying practices to better align with local realities and immediate needs.

To navigate these constraints, public sector leaders and workers use various tools and techniques, prioritizing tasks based on urgency, collaborating across departments, and adopting flexible decision-making processes for situational adjustments (Edwards & Saltman 2017; Paquet & Schertzer 2020). This pragmatism is supported by open communication channels that facilitate feedback exchange and enhance responsiveness to changing circumstances (Wang et al. 2023). Additionally, training programs focused on adaptive skills and resilience are crucial for preparing employees to handle their roles' complexities effectively (Rippon et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the intrinsic values of compassion and commitment to social justice are essential for public servants, aligning with public service motivation and enhancing their ability to navigate bureaucratic challenges effectively (Meier 2019). These values often foster a deep sense of purpose and commitment, enabling public servants to overcome the practical challenges posed by bureaucratic systems.

5.6.5 Contingency-Based Approach in Project Management

Contingency theory plays a significant role in understanding project delivery, particularly in public administration, by asserting that organizational effectiveness depends on how well structures adapt to external conditions (Lawrence & Lorsch 1967; Pennings 1975; Drazin & Van de Ven 1985). Early theorists, such as Woodward (1965) and Burns and Stalker (1961), highlighted the importance of aligning organizational structures with specific environmental demands, challenging the rigid "one-size-fits-all" approach that dominated early project management methodologies.

Over time, project management has increasingly recognized the need for context-specific approaches, moving away from rigid methodologies toward more flexible practices that can respond to varied project demands (Yap & Souder 1994; Eisenhardt & Tabrizi 1995; Balachandra & Friar 1997; Brown & Eisenhardt 1997; Souder & Song 1997). Shenhar (2001) advocated for tailoring project practices to fit specific conditions, while Engwall (2003) viewed projects as open systems interacting with their environments. Similarly, Winter et al. (2006) noted that project managers' decisions are influenced by personal biases and procedural frameworks.

In the public sector, contingency-based research has particularly focused on the challenges inherent in infrastructure and construction projects, where significant social dynamics come into play (Hanisch & Wald 2012). Studies by Joslin and Müller (2015) and Müller (2019) confirm that the success of project delivery methodologies often hinges on their ability to adapt to the specific contexts of each project.

While this study does not directly apply contingency theory, it acknowledges that Heidegger's concept of practical comportment, which guides our analysis, resonates with the principles of contingency theory. Both frameworks emphasize the importance of context-sensitive decision-making in project management. By recognizing this resonance, we enrich our understanding of how public sector project managers adapt their practices to the unique demands of their environments, thus aligning practical comportment with well-established ideas in contingency theory.

5.6.6 Heidegger's Philosophical Framework of Comportment

Heidegger's concept of comportment is particularly relevant for understanding the daily activities of public sector project managers, as it provides a lens through which their instinctive, context-sensitive decision-making processes can be examined (van der Hoorn & Whitty 2019). This concept emphasizes the importance of presence and action within the environment, challenging the traditional subject-object divide and contrasting with more static, formal approaches to project management (Dreyfus 1990; Crowell 2005). Unlike frameworks that focus primarily on adherence to formal processes, Heidegger's practical comportment offers a nuanced understanding of how project managers dynamically engage with their environments, adapting to the complexities of public sector project management (van der Hoorn, B. & Whitty, S. J. 2015; van der Hoorn & Whitty 2019). This framework is crucial for capturing the tacit knowledge and adaptive behaviours that are essential for navigating the socio-political dynamics inherent in public projects.

van der Hoorn and Whitty (2019) applied Heidegger's concept of comportment to explore how project managers align their actions with project tools and environments. This perspective uncovers the motivations behind their actions, emphasizing engagement and presence over a detached analytical approach (Dreyfus 1990; Crowell 2005). More broadly, Heideggerian concepts have been used in project management to explore the 'lived experience' of managers, offering alternatives to conventional process-focused views. For instance, Sewchurran and Brown (2011) analysed the dynamic nature of information systems projects, and van der Hoorn (2015) developed a Heideggerian framework based on Heidegger's (1962) *Being and Time* to understand project complexities. Additionally, Rolfe, Segal and Cicmil (2017) advocated existential hermeneutic phenomenology (EHP), rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, to help practitioners navigate the lived experiences of project work.

van der Hoorn and Whitty (2019) identified five key modes of comportment: To See, To Think, To Share, To Steer, and To Impress. These modes describe how project managers perceive events, anticipate possibilities, communicate plans, guide execution, and demonstrate competence. They also illuminate the instinctive knowledge and decision-making processes of project managers navigating organizational complexities. van der Hoorn and Whitty (2019) refer to these practical activities as "project managing," highlighting the nuanced, real-world practices distinct from traditional "project management." Such insights,

often overlooked in standard frameworks, are crucial for understanding the nuanced human elements of project delivery.

Heidegger's concept of comportment aligns with a pragmatic approach, a tradition widely used in organizational studies. Pragmatism, which favours practical realities over abstract metaphysics (Simpson & den Hond 2022) emphasizes understanding the everyday challenges of living in an uncertain world. Taylor (2011) illustrates how organizations are shaped by ordinary conversational practices. Rippin (2013) highlights the role of aesthetic and sensory experiences in inquiry, advocating for arts-based methods as fundamental to social progress. Kelemen, Rumens and Vo (2019) explore the duality of 'questions' and 'questioning' in inquiry, arguing for the value of curiosity-driven questioning beyond critique and position building.

These studies collectively highlight the relevance of pragmatic approaches in researching organizations and the lived experiences of social actors, revealing the realities of social actor interplay and the pragmatic spirit in which organizations produce outcomes.

In summary, established project management methodologies and the organizational processes derived from them, face criticism in the projectified public sector for lacking real-world applicability and failing to account for socio-political dynamics (Morris et al. 2006; Wells 2012; Svejvig & Andersen 2015; Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024). These criticisms highlight the need for flexibility in project delivery, aligning with Heidegger's practical comportment, which values context-specific methods over one-size-fits-all solutions.

Heidegger's concept of comportment reveals the tacit knowledge and decision-making inclinations of project managers, categorized into five modes by van der Hoorn and Whitty (2019). These modes provide a nuanced view of how project managers engage with their environments, which is crucial for understanding their approach to project delivery within formal process-driven settings. However, despite these insights, a notable gap remains in understanding how public sector project managers approach their formal project management processes, specifically their decision-making regarding adherence or deviation from established protocols. This highlights the necessity of our study's framework, which leverages Heidegger's concept of comportment to explore these decision-making processes in-depth.

5.7 METHODOLOGY

5.7.1 Research Design and Data Collection

This study employed a thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach, to examine how public sector project managers comport themselves in relation to their organizational project management processes. A 90-minute focus group session was conducted with nine senior project managers from an Australian state government department. Focus groups are particularly effective for exploring how specific groups perceive and discuss a phenomenon, providing rich diagnostic insights in participants' own language, and enabling the group dynamic to reveal nuanced understandings that might not emerge in individual interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani 2014).

Given the seniority and extensive experience of the participants, the focus group provided rich, detailed data, making the sample size of nine participants appropriate for this exploratory study. According to Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman (2020) a focus group of 4 to 10 participants is optimal for generating meaningful qualitative data, allowing for in-depth discussion while maintaining manageability. While this sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings, the data collected reached a saturation point, where additional participants were unlikely to provide new insights. This study should be viewed as a preliminary exploration, with future research potentially expanding on these findings using a larger and more diverse sample.

The discussion was structured using an episodic approach, encouraging participants to recount specific instances from their recent projects. This method effectively elicited narratives that illuminate the underlying reasons and contextual factors influencing their decisions to follow or diverge from formal management protocols (Mueller 2019). Participants were asked to reflect on recent projects where they found it impossible or inappropriate to use established project procedures and discuss the conditions contributing to these circumstances.

5.7.2 Thematic Analysis Procedure

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) guidelines to systematically identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data, with each step contributing directly to the emergence of the key findings.

Step-by-Step Analysis:

Familiarization with Data: The research team immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly listening to the recorded focus group session and meticulously reviewing the transcriptions. This immersion was critical for ensuring that subtle patterns and recurring themes were identified early in the analysis process

Generating Initial Codes: Using NVivo, initial codes were generated by highlighting relevant phrases, sentences, and paragraphs where participants discussed their engagement with, adaptations to, and deviations from formal project management processes. For example, the frequent mention of 'bending the rules' to meet urgent public demands emerged as a recurring code, which directly contributed to the identification of broader themes such as 'contextual adaptability'.

Searching for Themes: The initial codes were systematically grouped into broader themes, such as 'contextual adaptability,' which encapsulates project managers' ability to adjust their behaviours based on situational demands. This theme directly reflects the empirical evidence and illustrates how managers navigate the tensions between adhering to formal processes and the need for flexibility.

Reviewing Themes: The identified themes were critically examined and refined through an iterative process, ensuring they accurately represented the data. For instance, the theme 'contextual adaptability' was reassessed to ensure it included all relevant codes, such as those related to decision-making under pressure and the use of discretion, further solidifying its significance in the findings.

Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme related to both modes of comportment and influencing factors was meticulously defined and named to capture its essence and significance. For example, the theme 'contextual adaptability' was defined to represent how project managers adjust their behaviours based on situational demands, reflecting their practical comportment in action. This precise definition helped in clearly articulating the findings.

Reporting the Findings: The findings were synthesized into a coherent narrative that explains how the identified themes manifest in the comportment of project managers, particularly in their decisions to adhere to or deviate from formal processes. This narrative

directly answers the research question by linking the factors influencing project managers' decisions to their practical comportment toward formal processes.

5.7.3 Ethical Considerations

This study received ethics approval from the affiliated University's Human Ethics Committee (H18REA211). Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality. The anonymization of their responses was maintained to promote open and honest discourse.

5.8 FINDINGS

This section presents the core findings of our study, structured around four distinct modes of comportment identified through thematic analysis: To Use, To Manipulate, To Circumvent, and To Suffer. These modes reflect strategies that public sector project managers employ to navigate the complexities of their environments, including formal processes derived from reference documents they are expected to follow. Each mode encapsulates the factors influencing the decision to adopt a particular comportment, supported by quotes from participants P1 to P9. These factors illustrate how managers adapt and address challenges in implementing formal processes in the public sector.

Our findings emphasize that prioritizing the public good over strict protocol adherence is context dependent. This decision-making is shaped by the specific challenges public sector managers face in their operational environments. For instance, participants mentioned 'parachute projects'—initiatives imposed by higher authorities with set budgets and deadlines—that bypass standard processes, forcing managers to focus on public value delivery, even if it requires deviating from formal protocols.

5.8.1 To Use

Participants mentioned instances where their organisational project management processes worked as intended or aided them in certain scenarios.

Viewed as a Framework: P5 emphasized the value of viewing these processes as a flexible framework rather than a strict step-by-step guide, stating “they are not predictable and can't be standardised, but you have a framework in delivering the project documentation”.

Regulating Stakeholders: In situations where stakeholders seemed to be veering off track, processes served as a regulatory tool; “I tell them that they have to ‘tick A, B, C, D

before we get to the finish line. And their requests are just something that we can't put forward. So, I tend to just yeah, like I said, go back to the old three box process" (P1).

Post-Outcome Reviews: Processes often came under scrutiny when project outcomes faltered; "Project processes are only looked at when something's gone wrong" (P5), which indicates that management has a tendency to review processes only when results aren't met.

Process Efficacy: Some processes were deemed crucial and time-efficient by project managers. For instance, P8 highlighted the importance of risk assessment saying, "risk should be looked at on every project because its outer risk has to be quantified...it doesn't take an awful lot of time to quantify some risks".

Beyond Standard Processes: Participants indicated that sometimes they had to go beyond what's outlined in standard processes to achieve desired outcomes. P5 discussed the importance of clarifying requirements stating, "you can say what needs to be delivered but it's the requirements of that deliverable that aren't being clarified by anybody... everybody is accountable for it, project managers need to extract that detail".

Stakeholder Challenges: It became evident that stakeholders sometimes challenge the use of organisational processes; "We have such rigorous evaluation processes...and when it doesn't go in the client's favour, Department of Finance gets the blame" (P1). Which perhaps highlights the challenges faced when adhering strictly to processes.

In essence, while there are advantages to strictly following processes, challenges arise, especially when stakeholders question their application or outcomes falter.

5.8.2 To Manipulate

Participants also alluded to their manipulation of project management processes for achieving specific outcomes or navigating hinderance and challenges.

Crafting Manipulation: P7 discussed the art of process manipulation, mentioning "I won't say ways around the processes, but the best way of manipulating the process to get the outcome and turn around and get the results" (P7). This sentiment was echoed by P8 who said, "I've certainly become more skilful at doing that".

Challenging the Status Quo: Some participants wielded their occupational expertise to challenge traditional norms; "...like pushing the boundaries, challenging people and so

forth... last year I was going and telling the Premier that he couldn't have extra furniture” (P8).

Political Leverage: The interplay between processes and politics also emerged as a theme; “We are a big organisation. Big organisations don't get things done without politics. We also get things done because of politics” (P8).

Manipulating for Outcomes: If core project outcomes are met, then the manipulation of processes is acceptable; “So, from our perspective, an ordinary expression of interest and a tender process with ordinary builders probably wouldn't have given us the outcome that we wanted... So, what we decided to do was a three/four stage process...”(P2).

Navigating Challenges: When faced with stakeholder obstacles, manipulation can pave the way for progress; “You can get a stakeholder that goes and throws an obstacle in your way. If you can challenge that obstacle or you could actually find a way around it to deliver, to meet what they want. Then all the better” (P8).

To summarise, while the ‘To Use’ comportment emphasises the structured approach to processes, the ‘To Manipulate’ comportment reveals how public sector project managers employ adaptive strategies to navigate challenges and leverage opportunities for achieving desired outcomes.

5.8.3 To Circumvent

At times, project management processes didn't align with the realities of the project environment, prompting participants to seek alternative methods or 'workarounds'.

Intrinsic Expert Orientation: Often, stakeholders were willing to put their trust in the project manager's expertise; “Instead of going through the correct processes...we found that because I was comfortable with my knowledge in the situation, and the efficiencies that it provided, that's why we went down that path" (P1).

Stakeholder Pressure: Stakeholders often pushed project managers towards circumventing established processes, particularly when confronted with bureaucratic obstacles *and* time constraints; “Between the internal bureaucratic paperwork and red tape... agencies want funds expended in this financial year... you're always looking for ways around the processes” (P7).

Resource Constraints: The absence of resources like budgets and clear timeframes made circumvention a necessity; “You start on a road without a beginning, an end, a budget, or scope, yet we are still meant to create options and a timeframe” (P7).

Reactive Planning: Projects were frequently initiated with vague goals, only to evolve drastically as they progressed; “A project perceived to be a \$1.5 million project *suddenly* becomes a \$4 million project” (P7) and “there was no formal planning. This is all pulled together without any sort of plans and structure” (P6).

Process Deliberation: Some viewed formal processes as tools for reflection rather than strict guidelines, while others changed completely; “...the PMBOK® is there to put you in the ballpark of things to think about” (P3), and “We completely changed the approach, so yeah, yeah, 100%. So, we went to a more agile methodology and sort of – went from there” (P9).

Time Constraints: Speed was often prioritized over adherence to processes; “Risk versus speed and cost... we don't feel like there're options... you've got to test the boundaries and innovate to eliminate time-consuming activities” (P3), and “I think partly to do with timing, with pressures to get things going and moving and I guess the thing with best practice and all that kind of stuff, it does take a lot of front-end effort” (P4).

Stakeholder-driven Circumvention: Notably, it wasn't just project managers who desired sidestepping processes; “So, we worked collaboratively with the contractor. The contract basically went in the bottom drawer, and it was a team effort, we didn't have one dispute, we didn't have one falling out” (P2).

In the 'To Circumvent' compartment, project managers often find that established processes do not align with practical realities, prompting them to seek alternative ways. This tendency is driven by several factors: the intrinsic trust stakeholders place in project managers' expertise, bureaucratic pressures, resource constraints, reactive planning needs, and the urgency imposed by time constraints. These circumstances compel project managers to prioritize making progress and practical outcomes over strict adherence to established processes.

5.8.4 To Suffer (Submit)

There were situations where, despite their shortcomings, project management processes were the only reference point available to the managers. Here, participants were compelled to adhere to them even when the fit was far from ideal.

Lack of Direction: The absence of top-down guidance was a significant pain point; “It's frustrating that the organisation manages up and doesn't manage down... it becomes a micromanagement exercise” (P3).

Reactive Project Inception: Projects often began reactively, lacking proper planning or foundational structure; “We embark on projects without it being a project” (P8).

Overburdened Schedules: An excessive project workload was a common complaint, with P5 noting the direct repercussions where “People are stressed out from trying to do too much”.

Stakeholder Dictation: Stakeholders, rather than process or best practice, often directed project trajectories. P7 explained the strain of such interactions as; “You're not doing a PM job properly because you're being dictated to by the agencies”. This sentiment was amplified by P3’s reflection on personal stress due to resistance against these directives.

In the 'To Suffer (Submit)' comportment, project managers often must adhere to established processes due to stringent contractual and legal requirements, even when these do not align with project needs. This enforced adherence results in significant challenges, including overburdened schedules and external pressures from stakeholders who dictate project directions contrary to what is necessary. These conditions lead to considerable stress, complicates project execution, and adversely affects their well-being.

5.9 DISCUSSION

This study was initiated by observations that public sector project managers often create 'lite' versions of mandated organizational project management processes or opt not to use them at all (McGrath & Whitty 2019; Queensland Audit Office 2020; Office of the Auditor General Western Australia 2021). This behaviour is particularly intriguing given that these processes are regarded as best practices, derived from respected sources such as PRINCE2, the PMBOK® Guide, Managing Successful Programmes (MSP), and the Association of Project Management Body of Knowledge (APM BoK) (Hodgson et al. 2019; McGrath & Whitty

2019). Our investigation into the reasons behind this led us to formulate the following research question:

What factors influence public sector project managers' decisions to follow or diverge from their organisation's formal processes, and how can their comportment towards these processes be characterized?

Answering this two-part question provided two key insights. First, it identified both external and internal factors that influence project managers' decisions to adhere to or deviate from formal processes. These factors include pressure from powerful stakeholders, resource constraints, the need for reactive planning due to vague and evolving goals, and the urgency imposed by shifting time constraints. Second, it revealed the managers' behaviours and attitudes towards these formal processes.

Public sector project managers operate in environments fraught with factors that can hinder project progress or jeopardize outcomes. Faced with these challenges, they must decide whether formal processes will aid their efforts—if so, they may find using them beneficial; if not, they may manipulate or adapt them, circumvent them, or, when bound by contractual or legal obligations, endure them and hope for success elsewhere.

In this discussion, we aim to consolidate the practical and theoretical contributions and implications of our findings. Practically, we introduce the Pragmatic Comportment Compass, which defines the four identified modes of comportment: To Use, To Manipulate, To Circumvent, and To Suffer. This compass provides a framework for understanding how project managers strategically adapt to the complex demands of their roles and respond to formal processes.

While Agile emphasizes flexibility, responsiveness, and prioritizing stakeholder needs over strict process adherence, public sector environments often require balancing this adaptability with the conformity demanded by bureaucratic frameworks like PRINCE2 and PMBOK®. The Pragmatic Comportment Compass builds on these established concepts by highlighting not only how managers adapt and manipulate processes, but also how they may be compelled to endure, or suffer through, the constraints of rigid formal processes when adaptation is not feasible. By focusing on how managers balance these competing demands, the compass offers a refined approach that bridges the gap between Agile's stakeholder-focused flexibility and the process-oriented nature of bureaucratic project management.

Theoretically, we propose a re-evaluation of the concept of 'projectification' in the public sector. Our findings suggest that the traditional view of projectification—as the adoption of standardized project management frameworks to replace bureaucratic processes—is overly simplistic. Instead, our study supports a more nuanced understanding that incorporates principles from Contingency Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy. This perspective recognizes the critical role of managerial discretion and adaptability in delivering project work within the intricate and often unpredictable environments of the public sector.

The 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass' presented in this study is fundamentally rooted in Heidegger's concept of 'practical comportment,' which serves as the primary theoretical lens through which we explore the decision-making processes of public sector project managers. While we draw on street-level bureaucracy and contingency theory to enhance our understanding, these frameworks are utilized to contextualize and complement the Heideggerian emphasis on practical engagement and situational responsiveness in project management.

5.9.1 Forming The Pragmatic Comportment Compass: Forming a Model from Observations

We created the Pragmatic Comportment Compass to help understand and characterize public sector project managers' behavioural responses to their organization's formal project management processes. At its core, this compass represents the various ways in which these managers interact with, resist, adapt to, or endure the processes they face.

The Pragmatic Comportment Compass has four distinct modes (Figure 4):

To Use: This mode signifies the alignment of the existing organizational processes with the project managers' needs and objectives. When processes are fit-for-purpose, they are typically employed without deviation.

To Manipulate: When processes don't perfectly resonate with the project's demands but have room for adjustments, project managers opt for this mode. Here, they fine-tune the existing process, altering it to better suit their requirements and achieve desired outcomes.

To Circumvent: At times, the established processes are perceived as barriers. When these procedures seem obstructive and don't offer scope for customization, the instinct of project managers leads them to bypass or circumvent these processes altogether.

To Suffer: This mode emerges in situations where the inherent risks or potential compliance issues of circumventing the processes are too high. Recognizing the inadequacies of the processes, yet seeing no viable alternative, the project manager resigns to endure them.

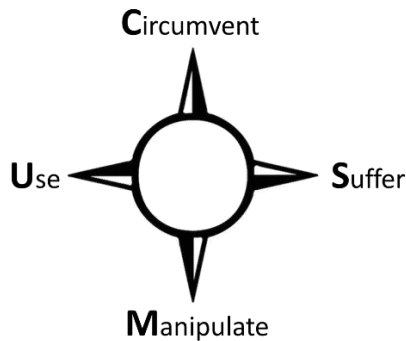


Figure 4: The Pragmatic Comportment Compass.

We suggest that the Pragmatic Comportment Compass presents an innovative approach to understanding the nuanced behaviours and decision-making processes of public sector project managers as they interact with organizational project management processes and stakeholders.

5.9.2 Rethinking Projectification

Current thinking defines projectification as the systemic transformation within various sectors, particularly in public administration, where project-based frameworks and temporary organizational forms are increasingly utilized to achieve specific, often short-term objectives.

Fred and Godenhjelm (2023) discuss the broad application and institutionalization of project-based frameworks in society, capturing the systemic transformation implied by this definition. They highlight the historical influences and broader societal adoption of project methods for managing complex tasks. Jensen (2023) further explores projectification in the public sector, emphasizing the shift towards using project-based frameworks to meet modern governance demands.

However, our findings suggest that this definition is overly simplistic. While it describes the broad adoption of project-based frameworks, it implies that public sector organizations primarily use these frameworks to replace inefficient bureaucratic processes. Yet, our study and other sources (Queensland Audit Office 2020; Office of the Auditor General Western

Australia 2021; Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024) indicate that project managers frequently do not use these standardized frameworks as intended.

Andersson (2009) criticizes projectification, claiming that it often fails to meet its objectives and does not effectively incorporate the needs and capabilities of local regions. Fred (2018) contends that projectification can dilute stable bureaucratic processes, making them more fragmented and potentially less efficient. He describes projectification as a "Trojan horse" that may undermine traditional governance structures rather than improving them. Additionally, projectification often results in rebureaucratization under a different guise (Hodgson 2004; Rhodes & Milani Price 2011; Fred 2023).

Our study reveals a more complex scenario. Although we did not collect specific data on the frequency of usage behaviours, if we assume an even distribution among the modes of engagement—using, manipulating, circumventing, or suffering—then these project-based frameworks are fully utilized as prescribed merely about 25% of the time. The predominant reality, covering 75% of instances, involves these frameworks being modified, bypassed, or reluctantly complied with due to their inadequacy in meeting the practical demands of public sector projects. This pattern suggests that public sector project managers are not merely following rigid project management rules, nor are they strictly adhering to traditional bureaucratic procedures. Instead, they are engaging in a pragmatic blend of approaches, creating a hybrid operational mode that transcends the conventional dichotomy between projectification and bureaucratization.

Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) examined why public sector organizations consider project management reference document-derived processes necessary, while their project managers frequently don't use them as intended. These processes appear to be both necessary and unnecessary. According to Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024), this phenomenon can be attributed to the project managers' need for both authority and autonomy to do their job successfully. In practice, the mere existence of formal organizational project management processes is sufficient to enable project managers in the public sector to exercise professional judgment and make informed decisions, all while being supported by senior management.

Our findings reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that public sector project managers systematically navigate formal processes through what we have defined as the 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass'. This tool transcends conceptual utility, embodying an indispensable

aspect of their role that is crucial for dealing with the dynamic demands of public sector projects. Therefore, it is imperative that project managers not only utilize the compass but also retain the indisputable discretion to employ it, to ensure project progress and outcomes are not compromised.

5.9.3 An Alternative Definition of Projectification

The prevailing definition of projectification in the public sector is the systemic transformation within various sectors, particularly in public administration, where project-based frameworks and temporary organizational forms are increasingly utilized to achieve specific, often short-term objectives. This definition implies a shift from bureaucratic processes to standardized project management methodologies derived from documents such as PRINCE2 and PMBOK® (Hodgson et al. 2019; McGrath & Whitty 2019; Fred & Godenhjelm 2023; Jensen 2023).

Based on our findings, we propose an alternative new definition of projectification:

Projectification is the strategic structuring of operational conditions that empower project managers to exercise their professional judgment and make informed decisions effectively.

This includes leveraging tools such as the 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass,' with robust support from senior management.

The key differences between current and our alternative are:

Flexibility vs. Rigidity: While the current definition focuses on rigidly applying standardized frameworks, our alternative emphasizes flexibility, viewing these frameworks as part of a spectrum of adaptable tools tailored to the unique demands of each project.

Empowerment vs. Compliance: Instead of a compliance-driven approach, our definition highlights the importance of empowering project managers with the authority and autonomy to use their professional judgment and adapt processes as necessary.

Environmental Support vs. Methodological Replacement: Rather than simply replacing old bureaucratic processes with new standardized methodologies, our definition advocates for creating an environment that supports judicious action. This involves selecting and adapting the most appropriate tools and approaches within ethical and moral boundaries.

Professional Judgment vs. One-Size-Fits-All: Moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, our alternative definition recognizes the importance of professional judgment. It allows project managers to blend elements of both projectified and bureaucratized approaches and develop new methodologies tailored to specific contexts.

Our alternative definition highlights the transformational nature of projectification, framing it as a strategic and supportive initiative that transcends mere methodological changes. By focusing on empowerment and adaptability, this new definition aligns project managing practices more closely with the complex realities of public sector work, ultimately leading to more effective and responsive project delivery. This reconceptualization not only enhances decision-making and outcomes but also fosters an environment where project managers can thrive and contribute more meaningfully to their organizations.

5.9.4 Project Managing as a Form of Street-Level Bureaucracy: Discretion as a Systemic Imperative

The Pragmatic Comportment Compass is rooted in the principles of street-level bureaucracy. It emphasizes that the discretion exercised by public service professionals—such as social workers, police officers, and teachers—is not a revocable privilege granted by senior management, but a necessary element of a public service system constrained by limited resources, ineffective structures, and complex demands. This discretion is essential for functionality, allowing public sector workers to make decisions on the ground that policies and processes cannot foresee.

The Compass clarifies the various adaptive strategies public sector project managers adopt to manage their formal organizational processes. It highlights that when existing processes support project goals, managers engage with them ('To Use'). When minor tweaks can optimize outcomes, they adapt them ('To Manipulate'). When processes become impediments, bypassing them ('To Circumvent') becomes necessary. And when bound by legal or contractual frameworks, managers may reluctantly comply ('To Suffer'), despite the misalignment with project needs.

This innate flexibility within street-level bureaucracy, as encapsulated by the Compass, reveals the nuanced exercise of discretion as an embedded feature of public sector project work. Far from being a revocable perk, discretion is a fundamental aspect of the public sector ethos that enables project managers to reconcile the rigidity of formal processes with the

fluidity required for effective project delivery. The Compass is therefore not merely a theoretical construct, but a practical recognition of the pragmatic decision-making exercised by project managers as they navigate the dichotomy between procedural adherence and the pragmatic realities of public sector project delivery.

5.9.5 Project Managing as an Embodiment of Contingency Theory: Strategic Adaptation in Action

Building on street-level bureaucracy, we extend our discussion to contingency theory, which posits that organizational effectiveness depends on aligning operational approaches with environmental conditions. Unlike traditional management theories that advocate a one-size-fits-all approach, contingency theory highlights the importance of flexibility and adaptability, enabling organizations to respond effectively to the dynamic and unpredictable nature of their environments.

The Pragmatic Comportment Compass serves as a practical embodiment of this theory. It equips public sector project managers with a strategic toolkit that allows them to navigate the complexities of their work environments thoughtfully and responsively. Each mode of the compass—To Use, To Manipulate, To Circumvent, and To Suffer—mirrors a specific strategic response that is contingent upon the internal and external factors impacting the project.

To Use reflects a direct alignment with contingency theory's premise that effective strategies harness existing organizational processes when these processes effectively meet the project's needs and external demands.

To Manipulate demonstrates adaptability, where project managers tailor existing procedures to better fit new or evolving project requirements and contexts, showcasing the theory's emphasis on flexibility.

To Circumvent represents a strategic response when environmental or organizational barriers render standard procedures ineffective. In this mode, project managers find alternative pathways to achieve project goals, bypassing the constraints that limit traditional approaches.

To Suffer acknowledges scenarios where project managers are compelled to comply with suboptimal processes due to overriding constraints such as legal requirements or contractual obligations, enduring these limitations while striving to maintain project progress.

These modes collectively illustrate how public sector project managers act as agents of contingency within public organizations, embodying the theory's principle that the best organizational actions are those tailored to specific situational variables. This situational sensitivity allows project managers to perform as pivotal elements that enable their particular organizations to function as responsive, adaptable entities, precisely attuned to the fluctuating demands of the public sector.

By aligning the Pragmatic Comportment Compass with street-level bureaucracy and contingency theory, this research highlights the critical role of public sector project managers in ensuring organizational adaptability. This dual theoretical grounding enhances our understanding of managerial discretion and underpins the need for frameworks like the Compass to support context-sensitive, strategically sound decision-making.

5.9.6 The Pragmatic Comportment Compass: An Embodiment of Pragmatism in Public Sector Project Managing

Having revealed the Pragmatic Comportment Compass through our study, we believe it exposes a moral and ethical dimension to the public sector project manager. We propose a reconceptualization of them, not merely as a figure of adaptability and practical wisdom, but as a moral agent deeply embedded within the fabric of societal needs and ethical standards. This reframing is critical for understanding the true depth of the decision-making processes involved in public sector project managing and offers a new lens through which these actions can be appreciated and studied further.

Amid the landscape of public duty, the Pragmatic Comportment Compass emerges not merely as a guidepost of pragmatism but as a deeper moral beacon that illuminates the public sector project manager not as a cold bureaucrat or budget/schedule conscious project manager, but as a deeply engaged moral actor, similar to William James' 'twice-born' individuals, who have grappled with public sector complexities and emerged transformed with a renewed sense of purpose. The choices reflected within the Pragmatic Comportment Compass radiate an ethical zeal reminiscent of John Dewey's emphasis on experience as the bedrock of understanding. These public sector project managers, in their dance with duty and

protocol, place societal aspirations above all—save for one: their own persistence to progress the project work in the face of adversity. But let us not mistake this for mere self-preservation. Like Dewey's (2012) call for reflective thought in action, these public sector project managers discern that at times, strategic submission is the path to the greater good. This suggests that their lived experience is at the intersection of personal survival and societal advancement, with their actions echoing James' and Dewey's pragmatic moral imperatives, advocating for a slightly better world with each project.

The Pragmatic Comportment Compass does more than simply catalogue behaviours; it stands as a testament to the ethos of pragmatism that appears to drive public sector project managers. By highlighting the nuanced decisions these professionals employ daily, it offers a more holistic understanding of the challenges they face and their directed action to these circumstances. As public sector endeavours continue to evolve, recognizing and valuing this pragmatism will be vital in fostering effective and responsive public sector service delivery practices.

The term "pragmatic" in the Pragmatic Comportment Compass is deeply rooted in the broader philosophical tradition of pragmatism, which emphasizes the importance of practical consequences and outcomes in decision-making (Menand 2002; Lorino 2018). By classifying the behaviours of public sector project managers into four distinct modes of comportment—To Use, To Manipulate, To Circumvent, and To Suffer—the Compass reflects a pragmatic spirit that prioritizes context-sensitive actions over rigid adherence to predefined protocols. Notably, the mode 'To Suffer' highlights the pragmatic necessity of enduring challenging circumstances when immediate change is not feasible, illustrating that sometimes the most practical action is to manage and endure difficulties to achieve long-term goals. This approach aligns with the organizational studies perspective, where flexibility, adaptability, and resilience are crucial in navigating the complexities of public sector projects.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Pragmatic Comportment Compass is the 'To Suffer' mode, which highlights a form of pragmatic endurance. This mode does not represent passive submission but rather a strategic and ethical choice, deeply rooted in the pragmatist tradition that values practical consequences and moral action in decision-making (Menand 2002; Lorino 2018). It acknowledges the power hierarchies and external constraints inherent in the public sector, where project managers often must endure challenging circumstances to achieve long-term goals. This pragmatic endurance reflects the lived experience of managers

who balance resilience and persistence with the need to progress and ensure stakeholder objectives are met. Such an approach resonates with the pragmatist emphasis on practical wisdom and ethical commitment to societal advancement, as broadly articulated by thinkers like John Dewey and William James.

5.10 CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the pervasive trend of 'projectification' in public sector project management, challenging the conventional wisdom that rigid adherence to structured and documented processes lead to better outcomes. By applying Heidegger's concept of 'practical comportment,' we offered a nuanced understanding of the operational realities faced by public sector project managers, emphasizing the importance of strategic flexibility over rigid compliance.

Our findings reveal that strict adherence to institutional project management processes derived from frameworks like PRINCE2 and PMBOK® often hinders rather than enhances effectiveness. Project managers thrive not by following these processes rigidly but by strategically choosing when to leverage, manipulate, bypass, or endure the system, as illustrated by the 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass.' This tool highlights that successful project delivery is not just about compliance but about navigating complex, real-world challenges with a flexible, pragmatic approach.

The implications of this study can be summarized as follows:

Strategic Flexibility vs. Rigid Compliance: The 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass' challenges traditional narratives, suggesting that public sector project managers succeed not by strict adherence to protocol but by strategically deciding when to use, manipulate, bypass, or endure the system.

Redefining Projectification: Instead of viewing projectification as a one-size-fits-all solution, this study posits it as a framework that should empower discretion, enabling project managers to navigate the complex realities of their environments. Projectification is redefined as an empowerment strategy, granting managers the discretion to make strategic decisions, including the choice to diverge from established protocols when necessary.

Pragmatism in Practice: The compass is more than a guide—it reflects the lived realities of project management, where pragmatic choices, including the endurance of

difficult processes, shape the success or failure of projects. The 'To Suffer' mode highlights the resilience required to endure and navigate through bureaucratic and procedural obstacles, demonstrating that endurance is a strategic, not a passive, choice.

The 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass' aligns with both street-level bureaucracy and contingency theory, highlighting the essential role of adaptability and situational responsiveness in public sector project management. It challenges traditional narratives by suggesting that project success is more about strategic flexibility and resilience than about rigid compliance.

For future research, we recommend exploring the application of the 'Pragmatic Comportment Compass' across diverse public sector contexts to assess its potential to improve project outcomes. Additionally, investigating the barriers to adopting this flexible, discretionary approach could offer deeper insights into the systemic changes required to enhance project management practices in the public sector.

THE PROJECTIFIED LIFE



Rooky Executive: "But we need a clear plan to show us the path forward!"

"Here at Derrida & Arendt Project Solutions, clarity is ... overrated."

Project Manager: "Not all paths exist ... you have to act to make them."

Plate 3: D&A Consulting: Doing What's Necessary in the Light of the Impossible

PLATE 3 ILLUSTRATION

Plate 3: D&A Consulting – Doing What’s Necessary in the Light of the Impossible visualises the core themes of Chapter 6, where project managing is understood as practical deconstruction. The triptych presents three contrasting figures, each expressing a different relationship to uncertainty, institutional constraint, and ethical responsibility.

In the first panel, the Rooky Executive clutches a heavy volume titled *Bureaucratic Management*. His expression is tense, his grip firm. He says, "But we need a clear plan to show us the path forward!" This figure represents the mindset that seeks certainty through procedure. He embodies the tendency to look for security in formal systems and rulebooks, even when those systems fall short of the complexities at hand. His posture reflects a fear of improvisation and an overreliance on control.

In the centre panel sit Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt, casually positioned at a sleek consulting table. Derrida holds a plan marked “BLANK,” symbolising the inherent indeterminacy at the heart of structured thinking. Arendt reads from a book titled *The Unwritten Future*, alluding to her idea of natality — the capacity to begin anew. Their shared line, "Here at Derrida and Arendt Project Solutions, clarity is ... overrated," plays with the irony of philosophical ideas dressed in corporate language. These figures represent not disengagement, but deep thoughtfulness. They acknowledge the impossibility of total clarity and invite us to act despite it.

In the final panel, a project manager steps through an open door. She carries only a lanyard and a jacket. Her voice is steady: "Not all paths exist ... you have to act to make them." Unlike that of the Rooky’s posture, hers is defined by movement. She does not wait for conditions to become certain. Instead, she accepts uncertainty as part of the work. Her action is neither reckless nor defiant. It is ethical, informed, and responsive.

This Plate captures a central argument of the thesis. Project managing is not about following predetermined plans. It is about engaging with uncertainty through judgement, care, and the courage to act. The figure who walks forward does so not in spite of ambiguity but because of it. In that motion, she creates the very conditions under which the work becomes possible.

CHAPTER 6: THE ETHICS OF PROJECT MANAGING: PERMISSION, DISCRETION, AND JUDGMENT IN A PROJECTIFIED WORLD

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the full manuscript for the third peer-reviewed paper developed as part of this doctoral research study (Study 3). The paper is titled The Ethics of Project Managing: Permission, Discretion, and Judgment in a Projectified World. It is currently prepared for submission and been submitted to the *Journal of Political Philosophy*.

6.2 KEY RELEVANCE TO THIS THESIS

- Chapter 6 Highlights how project managing demands ethical discretion beyond procedural compliance with Bodies of Knowledge (BoKs)
- Conceptualises project managing as interpretive and contingent action situated within conditions of ambiguity and competing demands
- Reframes projectification not merely as technical rationalization but as the granting of permission for situated ethical judgment
- Supports the thesis argument that project managing is an exercise in ethical agency, not just technical delivery

6.3 CITATION AND CO-AUTHOR DETAILS

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6.4 ABSTRACT

This paper explores how project managing, as a contemporary form of organizing, extends beyond the formal boundaries of codified Bodies of Knowledge (BoKs). Drawing on philosophical traditions that emphasize discretion, judgment, and ethical action, it argues that project managing cannot be reduced to technical execution nor fully captured through procedural frameworks. Instead, project managing is conceptualized as an exercise of practical judgment in conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity, and competing demands. The analysis considers how BoKs both authorize and constrain project managers, offering a form of permission while simultaneously narrowing the field of ethical discretion. By reframing projectification not merely as a technical rationalization of work, but as a dynamic granting of permission to act amidst complex circumstances, this paper situates project managing within broader debates about knowledge, responsibility, and ethical agency. In doing so, it contributes to understanding the lived experience of project managers as situated agents, whose actions are necessarily interpretive and contingent. The paper suggests that cultivating ethical discretion is central to project managing in practice and argues for a reappraisal of how professional authority is conferred and exercised in projectified environments.

Key words: Project managing, Ethical discretion, Judgment, Bodies of Knowledge (BoKs), Projectification, Permission, Ethical agency, Methodologies, Practical deconstruction

6.5 INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the world of project managing appears to be one of structured plans, rigid frameworks, and procedural adherence. Yet beneath this facade lies a dynamic craft—a nuanced engagement with uncertainty, adaptability, and ethical decision-making. Unlike the formal discipline of project management, with its codified methodologies and standardized processes, project managing is inherently responsive and reflective. It involves navigating ambiguity, questioning established norms, and reshaping plans to meet the fluid realities of practice.

This study explores project managing as an embodiment of Practical Deconstruction, a reflective and adaptive process grounded in the philosophies of Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida. Practical Deconstruction reveals how individuals balance codified knowledge with tacit understanding, reconcile certainty with uncertainty, and engage in the continuous

creation of meaning. At its core, this approach challenges binary thinking, encouraging a synthesis of structure and spontaneity, procedure and innovation, compliance and discretion.

In this process, project managing becomes a form of “writing on the world”. Drawing on Derrida’s concept of arche-writing, the actions, decisions, and adaptations made in the course of project managing inscribe meaning, values, and intentions onto the shared environment. Each choice leaves a trace, shaping the immediate context while gesturing toward future possibilities. Far from being passive executors of plans, project managers are active participants in a dynamic process of world-making—transforming not only their projects but also themselves and their communities.

This study examines these ideas through seven interconnected dimensions—Intrinsic Motivation, Aporia, Action, Natality, Ethical Responsibility, Différance, and Codifiable vs. Ineffable Truths, which collectively form the foundation of Practical Deconstruction. As summarized in Table 5 these dimensions offer a nuanced lens for understanding the creative, ethical, and transformative aspects of project managing.

Table 5: Dimensions of Practical Deconstruction

Dimension	Theoretical Basis	How It Acts as a Lens
Intrinsic Motivation	Kant: Natural Metaphysics; Arendt: Natality; Derrida: Arche-writing	Examines the internal drivers of action, emphasizing the alignment between intrinsic motivations and the capacity to initiate creativity and resilience in uncertain contexts.
Aporia	Derrida: Moments of undecidability and impasse	Interprets how individuals confront and navigate uncertainties, transforming complex dilemmas into opportunities for meaning making and progress.
Action	Arendt: Plurality, public sphere, and arche-writing; expression of Natality	Explores collaborative and transformative acts, emphasizing relational, social, and public engagement that reshape shared realities.
Natality	Arendt: Capacity for beginning anew; Natal Willingness, Freedom, Resistibility, Performativity, and Ethical Responsibility	Highlights the human potential for renewal and creation, emphasizing the transformative nature of beginnings and the ethical dimensions of public engagement.
Ethical Responsibility	Arendt: Freedom, plurality; Derrida: Arche-writing	Investigates how ethical considerations guide decisions and practices, aligning actions with shared values and societal good.
Différance	Derrida: Deferral, relational meaning, instability of mental concepts (e.g., limits, lines, and circles)	Analyses the inherent instability of methodologies and the necessity of iterative, adaptive engagement with meaning and practice.
Codifiable vs. Ineffable Truths	Derrida: Arche-writing; Limits, Lines, Circles; Arendt: Distinction between knowledge and understanding	Highlights the interplay between explicit, codifiable knowledge and tacit, ineffable understanding, emphasizing the need for intuition in navigating uncertainties.

The exploration begins with Intrinsic Motivation, the internal drivers that sustain project managers amid uncertainty. Aporia, those moments of profound undecidability, challenges individuals to engage in reflective action, transforming obstacles into opportunities for new

meaning. Action, as Arendt describes, is the highest expression of human freedom, while Natality captures the capacity to begin anew and create what is valuable to the community. These dimensions converge in Ethical Responsibility, highlighting the relational and moral commitments that underpin decision-making.

Derrida's notion of Différance reveals the fluidity of meaning, reminding us that project managing is not about finding fixed solutions but engaging in continuous interpretation. Finally, the interplay between Codifiable and Ineffable Truths highlights the importance of intuition and tacit knowledge in navigating the unpredictable terrain of project work.

Through these dimensions, Practical Deconstruction emerges as a framework for virtuous action. Far from playing loose with the rules, project managers who engage in Practical Deconstruction demonstrate courage, ethical awareness, and a commitment to the greater good. In confronting uncertainty, they do not abandon structure recklessly; rather, they weave together codifiable truths and ineffable insights in ways that serve both individual and collective aims.

This study invites us to see project managing not merely as a technical skill, but as a philosophical and ethical practice; one that embraces the complexities of human experience and the ever-evolving nature of meaning. In doing so, project managing becomes a continuous act of inscribing the world with meaning. It is a dynamic, reflective process of shaping and being shaped by the challenges we face and the values we uphold.

6.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

6.6.1 Intrinsic Motivations

Kant's notion of natural metaphysics speaks to an intrinsic structure embedded within our biology, a cognitive framework that transcends mere sensory perception to organize and shape our understanding of the world (Kant 2007). Far from being an abstract intellectual exercise, this metaphysical drive emerges as a core feature of our evolved cognitive architecture. It compels us to seek deeper truths about existence, driving us to challenge assumptions, reinterpret experiences, and strive for a more profound comprehension of reality.

The philosophical views of Derrida, Arendt and Heidegger are heavily centred around individuals' thoughts, how they derive meaning and deliver action. Derrida's primary

contribution was the development of deconstruction, a critical approach that examines the relationship between language, meaning, and power. Arendt connects natality directly to our capacity for action. Because we are born, we have the inherent ability to act, to insert ourselves into the world and make a difference. Heidegger's concept of comportment refers to how humans practically engage with the world, encompassing both actions and attitudes. These philosophers offer perspectives that identify what thoughts, actions and situations enable project managing to occur.

This innate pursuit of meaning resonates deeply with Derrida's concept of deconstruction. As we will develop shortly, Derrida's meticulous approach to text lays bare the multiplicity of meanings embedded within language, rigorously interrogating the binaries and norms that we often accept uncritically. By exposing these layers, deconstruction echoes the Kantian imperative to question and reframe our understanding of the structures that shape our engagement with the world.

In the physical world of task allocation, physiological and environmental influences interplay to shape the division of labour. For instance, in ant colonies, task allocation is guided by a combination of age, hormonal levels, and environmental stimuli such as pheromones and interaction patterns. These mechanisms ensure that tasks are distributed efficiently, responding dynamically to immediate needs and available resources. Similarly, in human career choices, intrinsic factors like personality, skills, and individual preferences converge with extrinsic influences such as job market conditions and societal expectations. This dynamic interplay not only determines the roles individuals take on but also appears to optimize both job satisfaction and productivity, much like in ant colonies that bear evidence of a well-functioning colony (Gordon 1996).

Hormonal influences play a pivotal role in shaping an ant's task preferences. For example, the levels of juvenile hormone are known to determine whether an ant becomes a forager venturing outside the nest or remains within to perform worker roles. Beyond hormonal factors, ants are highly attuned to environmental stimuli that trigger specific behaviours. The detection of particular pheromones, for instance, can induce foraging activities or activate alarm responses, illustrating how external cues govern task allocation within the colony (Bonabeau, Theraulaz & Deneubourg 1998). In addition to these external and hormonal drivers, ants align their activities with their physiological states. Those with higher energy reserves are more inclined to take on energetically demanding tasks such as foraging, while

ants with lower energy levels gravitate towards less strenuous duties within the nest. This dynamic interplay between physiological needs and task selection highlights how ants are drawn to roles that provide necessary physiological stimuli, ensuring both individual and colony efficiency (Robinson 1992).

Interestingly, and central to our theory, is the phenomenological 'shape' of the task or event that the ant finds inherently satisfying. The specific characteristics of tasks or environmental triggers—such as the type of pheromone detected or the physical demands of a particular activity—interact with the physiological and hormonal state of the ant, guiding it towards tasks that align with its immediate needs. While this subjective experience is not conscious in the human sense, it plays a critical role in shaping task allocation within the colony (Hölldobler & Wilson 2009).

Equally significant is that the overall organization of work in ant colonies emerges as a property of the interactions between individual ants and their environment. This self-organizing behaviour, where tasks are distributed through local interactions and feedback mechanisms rather than centralized control, highlights the complexity of task allocation in social insect societies (Gordon & Mehdiabadi 1999). The notion that tasks *choose* ants as much as ants *choose* tasks reflects a sophisticated evolutionary strategy, enhancing both the efficiency and adaptability of the colony.

In the human world, research into the motivations of free solo climbers has illuminated a fascinating interplay of psychological traits, risk-taking behaviours, and deeply personal experiences (Brymer & Houge Mackenzie 2017). These climbers often demonstrate elevated levels of sensation seeking, characterized by a drive for novel and intense experiences. Frequently described as possessing a Type T (thrill-seeking) personality, they engage in high-risk activities not merely for the inherent danger but for the excitement and arousal such challenges evoke.

Studies also highlight unique psychological states experienced by free solo climbers. Achieving a flow state—a condition of total immersion and focus—is a key motivator, as is their remarkable ability to manage fear and risk effectively. Beyond individual traits, social and cultural factors play a role. The climbers often draw inspiration and validation from community bonds, shared risk culture, and the personal narratives they construct around their feats.

Notably, most free solo climbers begin with traditional climbing, gradually transitioning to the more extreme discipline of free soloing. This progression reflects the cumulative development of their technical skills, psychological resilience, and confidence, underscoring the deeply experiential and iterative nature of their engagement with risk and reward.

Building on our insights about ants, where specific tasks select for particular behaviours, we see a striking parallel in the human world of climbing. Just as tasks within an ant colony draw individuals based on their physiological and environmental readiness, cliffs and challenging terrains act as natural selectors, attracting climbers with specific psychological and physical traits. Free solo climbers, in particular, are inherently drawn to the extreme demands and profound rewards of climbing without ropes. Here, the environment becomes a selective force, shaping their skills, mental resilience, and desire for intense, transformative experiences.

This process of natural selection highlights the reciprocal relationship between climbers and their environment. The cliffs, much like the foraging tasks for ants, challenge climbers to confront their limits and refine their abilities, while simultaneously defining their identity and purpose. Just as ants are instinctively drawn to tasks that fulfil their role within the colony, climbers are irresistibly drawn to the cliffs that test and ultimately shape them (Brymer & Houge Mackenzie 2017).

6.6.2 Aporia

Having explored how ants are drawn to tasks that satisfy their needs and the parallels this has with the uncertain, complex nature of free solo climbing, we now turn to Derrida's concept of aporia. This philosophical lens illuminates the profound challenges inherent in navigating complex decisions, including the perennial question: 'What should I or we do next?' It also explains why written texts, such as project management methodologies or organizational protocols, can never fully resolve these existential and practical dilemmas.

Derrida defines an aporia as an impasse—a state of paralysis or being without passage. It marks moments where we find ourselves at a loss, unable to proceed through a physical space, a social situation, or a set of ideas. Confronting an aporia exposes the points at which language, understanding, and meaning fall short. In these instances, language proves insufficient to encapsulate the essence of a situation or to prescribe a definitive course of action (Derrida 1993). Aporias also emerge in the realm of moral and ethical decision-making, where every possible action carries both necessity and irresolvable dilemmas.



Figure 5: Seeking the Impassable Path

However, Derrida emphasizes that an aporia is not merely a temporary blockage or a puzzle to be solved. Rather, it represents an encounter with the very limits of our conceptual and emotional frameworks. Such moments compel us to act decisively, even in the absence of clear, predefined rules or pathways. In navigating these aporetic states, we shoulder the burden of accountability, reflecting deeply on the consequences of our actions while summoning the courage to move forward despite the uncertainty.

Intriguingly, aporetic moments possess an alluring quality. Far from being purely paralysing, they draw us in; we actively seek out and engage with such impasses (Derrida 1995). The confrontation with undecidability and obstacles becomes profoundly compelling, driving individuals to repeatedly immerse themselves in these challenges (Beardsworth 2013). This phenomenon is rooted in an intrinsic drive to grapple with and transcend uncertainties—a process that yields psychological and even physiological fulfilment.

Here, echoes of Kant's natural metaphysics resonate. Our inherent cognitive structure compels us to pursue deeper meanings and truths, to challenge assumptions, and to reinterpret

our experiences. In this light, aporias are not simply obstacles but invitations to engage with the unknown, offering opportunities for growth, creativity, and profound insight.

Figure 2 **Error! Reference source not found.** encapsulates the essence of an aporia, a moment of profound impasse that simultaneously challenges and compels us toward resolution. Each component of the image serves as a metaphorical lens for interpreting the multifaceted nature of aporetic encounters:

The Path to the Aporia: This represents the interplay of codifiable truths and ineffable truths that guide us through life's terrain. The structured path mirrors codified knowledge—articulated principles and methodologies—while the rough edges and unpredictable deviations embody ineffable truths, the tacit, felt understandings that elude precise articulation. Together, these truths shape the interpretive journey, blending the rational with the emotional and the articulated with the intuitive.

The Moment of Existential Dread (1st Instance): The stationary figure at the edge of the path symbolizes the individual abruptly confronted by an aporia. This is a moment of existential dread—a psychological and intellectual impasse where the comforting continuity of meaning collapses. This stark encounter demands reflection and reassessment, forcing the individual to grapple with the destabilizing complexity and uncertainty of their situation. This figure embodies the initial paralysis that characterizes the aporetic state, illustrating the weight of the question, “What do I do next?”.

The Chasm of Uncertainty: The precipitous drop and the desolate landscape below illustrate the disorienting fragility of meaning during aporetic moments. The abyss starkly conveys the void that emerges when familiar frameworks and assumptions fail, stripping away certainty. The rugged chasm also highlights the isolation inherent in these moments, emphasizing the individual's existential solitude when faced with the limits of language, knowledge, and understanding. It vividly represents the magnitude of the impasse, heightening the gravity of decision-making in such moments.

The Free-Climber: Active Engagement (2nd Instance): In contrast to the halted figure, the second depiction of the individual scaling the rock embodies active engagement with the aporia. Like a free climber, the individual deconstructs the seemingly insurmountable challenge, step by deliberate step, transforming the impasse into a navigable path. This act is emblematic of Practical Deconstruction—a holistic engagement with

complexity that integrates cognitive analysis, emotional resilience, and instinctive adaptability. The physicality of climbing symbolizes the embodied nature of this process, where overcoming challenges is as much about intuition and visceral engagement as it is about intellectual deliberation.

The Pursuit of Aporias: The path already travelled reflects the intrinsic motivation that drives individuals toward challenges and aporias. This pursuit is not merely a necessity but an active and rewarding quest. The individual derives physiological and psychological fulfilment from navigating impasses, echoing the thrill and flow experienced by free solo climbers. This relentless drive speaks to our inherent capacity for renewal, aligning with Arendt's concept of natality, the human propensity for beginning anew, creating meaning, and finding joy in resolving complexities. In this sense, the journey toward aporia becomes as significant as the encounter itself, reinforcing the intrinsic value of seeking out and overcoming profound dilemmas.

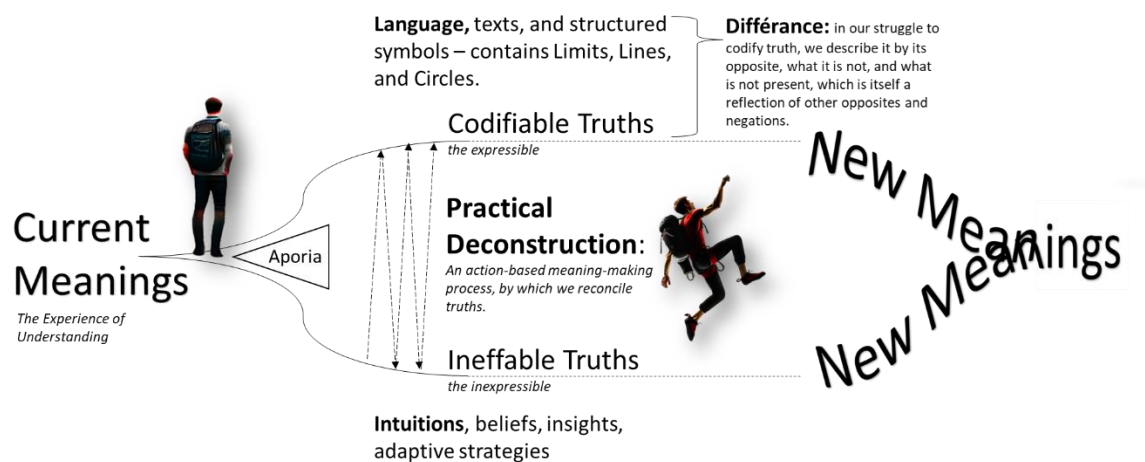


Figure 6: The Role of Aporia and Practical Deconstruction in the Quest for Meaning

Figure 6 visually captures the existential and intellectual challenges of encountering an aporetic moment, when familiar frameworks of understanding fragment, revealing the interplay between codifiable and ineffable truths. This conceptual diagram draws on Derridean philosophy to illustrate how meaning is navigated and reconstructed through Practical Deconstruction.

Meaning and the Experience of Understanding: The figure begins with Current Meanings, representing an individual's effort to interpret and integrate their experiences into a

coherent understanding of the world. This process inherently involves navigating both codifiable and ineffable truths, which become more distinct when one encounters an aporia.

The Aporia represents a central impasse, a moment of profound uncertainty and undecidability where the path forward is obstructed, forcing a re-evaluation of meaning and action. In this state, existing understandings become unclear, necessitating a critical examination of frameworks and assumptions.

Codifiable Truths (The Expressible Realm): Codifiable truths signify the aspects of knowledge and practice that can be explicitly articulated through language and formal structures. These truths are:

- Constructed iteratively through symbolic associations, akin to Saussure's concept of the relationship between the *signifier* (e.g., the word “dog”) and the *signified* (the concept of “dog”) (Key & Noble 2017).
- Aligned with Derrida’s notion of *arche-writing*, which reveals that all forms of linguistic expression are grounded in a metaphysical structure of *différance*—where meaning is generated through differences and perpetually deferred (Derrida 1997).
- Embodied in methodologies, frameworks, and best practices that strive for clarity and guidance in navigating complex realities. However, these frameworks inevitably fail to encapsulate the full spectrum of lived experiences and tacit knowledge, highlighting their provisional and evolving nature.

While codifiable truths offer structure and guidance, they are provisional and context-dependent, reflecting the limitations of language itself.

Ineffable Truths (The Inexpressible Realm): In contrast, ineffable truths represent the deeply intuitive and embodied aspects of understanding that resist articulation. These truths include:

- Intuitions, beliefs, insights, and adaptive strategies that emerge from direct engagement with complex and dynamic environments.

- The tacit knowledge acquired through experience, such as a pianist’s ability to perform seamlessly or a climber’s instinctive responses to the terrain.
- Elements of human cognition and perception that transcend codification, forming the bedrock of practical wisdom.
- While ineffable truths defy full articulation, they are indispensable for navigating the uncertainties and ambiguities of aporetic moments. They highlight the necessity of a holistic approach to understanding, where formal structures are complemented by intuitive, experiential insights.

Practical Deconstruction (Reconciling Dualities): At the heart of Figure 6 lies *Practical Deconstruction*—the action-based process of reconciling codifiable and ineffable truths. This process involves:

- Engaging with the aporia to critically examine and adapt existing frameworks
- Balancing the structured clarity of codifiable truths with the intuitive adaptability of ineffable truths
- Creating **New Meanings** by integrating these insights through reflective action, symbolized in the diagram by the merging or “zipping together” of the words.
- This reflects the reality of any reflective practice, where individuals must reinterpret and adapt their actions in response to evolving challenges and contexts.
- **Differentiating Limits, Lines, and Circles:** The diagram also draws on Derrida’s exploration of *limits, lines, and circles* (Derrida 1988), which illustrate how human cognition delineates the boundaries of expressible understanding while pointing toward the ineffable. By acknowledging these boundaries, we can better appreciate the fluid nature of meaning-making and the necessity of Practical Deconstruction.

Implications for Practice: Figure 6 highlights the transformative potential of engaging with aporias. By confronting these moments of uncertainty, individuals develop resilience, confidence, and deeper comprehension. This pursuit of meaning, through the

integration of codifiable and ineffable truths, highlights the ethical and creative dimensions of Practical Deconstruction, providing a nuanced approach to understanding and action in complex environments.

6.6.3 Action

Arendt's notion of action aligns with Derrida's concept of arche-writing but is distinct from the categories of labour and work. While labour concerns biological needs and the cyclical maintenance of life, and work addresses the creation of lasting objects and structures in the world, action is oriented toward the expression of freedom and the initiation of something new (Arendt 1998). Action, for Arendt, represents the highest expression of human activity, as it unfolds in the public realm, directly between individuals, and is rooted in our condition of plurality; the fundamental fact that we exist among others who are both like and unlike ourselves (Arendt 1998).

Unlike labour and work, which often involve intermediaries such as tools, processes, or objects, action takes place without mediation and depends entirely on interaction with others. It is deeply social, deriving its meaning from relationships and the shared world that emerges through these interactions. As Arendt writes, "Action is the one miracle-working faculty of man, enabling him to create something new" (Arendt 1998, pp. 246-7).

Action is inherently unpredictable and boundless, as its outcomes are shaped by the interplay of intentions, responses, and the collective nature of the public sphere. This capacity for initiating something unforeseen allows humans to shape and transform social and political realities. A political speech, a protest, or even a spontaneous act of kindness are all instances of action that leave enduring marks on the shared world (Arendt 1990, pp. 19-21). Marks that can bear the hallmarks of personal virtue and conviction to act for the sake of what is considered 'right'.

In this way, action is not merely an act of doing; it is an act of beginning. It reflects the courage to step into the unknown and to embrace the uncertainties inherent in human relationships. Through the lens of Derrida's arche-writing, action can be seen as a form of inscribing meaning onto the shared world; an act of creation that transforms both the actor and their context. In moments of aporia, those profound instances of uncertainty and undecidability, action becomes the mechanism through which individuals navigate and transform their understanding. These aporetic encounters compel a reflective process of

Practical Deconstruction, where individuals reconcile codifiable and ineffable truths to generate new meanings. In the act of creating these new meanings, individuals also create themselves and their communities. The values embedded in these meanings shape the collective understanding of what matters. This transformative process is inherently existential, reflecting a rejection of normative constraints and an embrace of dynamic, self-determined action.

Just as Figure 6 illustrates, action emerges not despite these uncertainties but because of them, enabling individuals to inscribe novel interpretations onto their lived experiences. The tension of navigating uncertainty reveals intrinsic motivations, compelling individuals to take a leap of faith (Margetts, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024); to back themselves and, in doing so, affirm their capacity for change and renewal. By stepping into the unknown, action holds the potential to disrupt established frameworks and bring forth new realities. Both Arendt and Derrida emphasize that the essence of human existence lies in creation, interaction, and change rather than mere survival or production.

Viewed this way, everyday actions hold the potential to rewrite our shared reality. This process of rewriting is dynamic and adaptive, shaped by the interplay of what can be codified and what remains ineffable. In this sense, action is a response to aporia, where uncertainty becomes the fertile ground for innovation and renewal. Each act of engagement inscribes new possibilities, demonstrating the transformative potential inherent in confronting and embracing ambiguity. These unscripted moments inscribe intentions, values, and aspirations onto the fabric of the world. Arendt's insights reveal life as an ongoing narrative of creation and renewal, where human experience is perpetually shaped by dynamic interactions and the unfolding story of existence (Arendt 1961). This interplay between Arendt's and Derrida's ideas highlights the profound significance of action in shaping our collective and individual realities.

6.6.4 Natality

Arendt's exploration of natality is central to her understanding of human existence as fundamentally defined by the capacity to begin anew. She describes natality as "the new beginning inherent in birth" and asserts that this capacity for beginning is the very essence of action (Arendt 1998, p. 9). For Arendt, natality signifies the human potential to initiate the unexpected, to act in ways that disrupt the continuity of existing structures and relationships, and to create new realities in the public and political realms. This capacity for new

beginnings is particularly evident in the process of Practical Deconstruction, where individuals encounter aporia, profound moments of uncertainty, and engage in reflective action to reconcile codifiable and ineffable truths. In these moments, natality is not just the creation of something new; it is the creation of what is valuable and what matters to the community. The merging or ‘zipping together’ of codifiable and ineffable truths to create new meanings, as depicted in Figure 6, symbolizes the essence of natality: a moment where uncertainty gives rise to creative possibilities and transformative insights.

This act of beginning is infused with collective meaning and personal virtue, reflecting the courage to confront uncertainty and trust one’s intrinsic motivations. The mountain climber’s ascent in Figure 2 symbolizes this willingness to engage with aporia, take risks, and forge new meanings. Through this process, individuals are transformed by the values they create, becoming seekers and makers of meaning who continuously shape both themselves and the world around them.

Natality, rooted in the fact of birth, highlights that every human being enters the world with the capacity to bring something unprecedented into it. Arendt writes: “With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself” (Arendt 1998, p. 177). This principle is not confined to grand political revolutions but extends to the smallest acts of initiative and engagement. A dissenting voice in a meeting, an intervention in an abusive situation, or a spontaneous act of kindness are all instances of natality in action, as they disrupt the status quo and create new possibilities for change. In the face of aporia, natality becomes the catalyst for generating new understandings. This willingness to confront the unknown and initiate something unprecedented reflects the profound human capacity for renewal. The act of creating new meanings, exemplifies how natality transcends disruption by fostering a synthesis of structured knowledge and intuitive insight.

Natality is intimately tied to freedom, which Arendt understands not as an internal state of the will but as something realized through action in the public sphere. Freedom, in Arendt’s view, is experienced only in the performing act (Arendt 1961). For her, freedom emerges when individuals take initiative, engage with others, and participate in shaping the collective world. This freedom is not merely the absence of constraint but the ability to act spontaneously and collaboratively, to insert oneself into the web of human relationships and alter its trajectory.

Two key ideas emerge in relation to natality: natal willingness and the interconnectedness of freedom and action. Natal willingness reflects the readiness to act, to take risks, and to embrace the unpredictability of initiating something new. Action, as the realization of natality, carries with it an inherent unpredictability and boundlessness, as it is impossible to fully foresee the outcomes of human initiatives (Arendt 1998). Together, these ideas highlight Arendt's belief that human existence is fundamentally defined by its capacity for renewal and transformation, for breaking from established patterns and forging new paths.

6.6.4.1 Natal Willingness

Natal willingness is an inherent readiness to act, rooted in the human capacity to initiate within a shared world (Rae 2024). While the term 'natal willingness' is not explicitly used by Arendt, it emerges as a logical extension of her emphasis on action as the realization of our ability to initiate and transform. Arendt discusses this will as a driving force that propels us to act in ways that shape the world, even when faced with uncertainty and constraint (Arendt 1981).

This willingness to act is not limitless; rather, it exists within the bounded freedom of specific contexts. Arendt highlights the paradoxical nature of freedom: it is both constrained by the realities of the world and enabled by our capacity to transcend those constraints through action (Arendt 1998). In this sense, natal willingness highlights the human ability to start something new within the framework of existing conditions, engaging with both possibilities and limitations.

Arendt's idea of the will as a creative and initiating force aligns closely with natal willingness. She notes that action, rooted in natality, always carries the potential to disrupt the status quo and to bring about new beginnings, even in the face of significant obstacles (Arendt 1998). Natal willingness, then, represents the readiness and courage to confront uncertainty, make decisions, and take steps that open up new possibilities. It is this willingness that underpins the continual emergence of the novel and the transformative in human affairs. This readiness is particularly crucial when navigating moments of aporia, where established meanings break down. Through Practical Deconstruction, individuals exercise natal willingness by reconciling codifiable and ineffable truths to forge new understandings. Figure 6 illustrates this process, where the creation of new meanings emerges as a tangible expression of natality, a deliberate and courageous step into uncharted territory.

6.6.4.2 Authority: Foundation and Continuous Renewal

For Arendt, authority is intimately tied to the act of foundation and the processes of renewal that sustain it. The authority of a political world built by power derives from the collective and free actions of equals acting in concert. This world is not the product of strength or violence but of mutual promises and reciprocity aimed at bringing something new into being. The foundation of authority, therefore, relies on the irresistible motivation of the collective, enabling free speech and political action.

The authority established by foundational acts, Arendt argues, carries its legitimacy within itself: “It was the authority which the act of foundation carried within itself...” (Arendt 1990, p. 199). In this context, Arendt emphasizes that true authority is self-sustaining when it emerges from collective agreement and shared purpose, rather than from external sources such as tradition or coercion. This kind of authority must be continually renewed through the active engagement and commitment of those who sustain it, ensuring its democratic and participatory character. Legitimacy is sustained by the ongoing, practiced mastery witnessed by others.

Arendt critiques the notion of freedom as inherent in the free will tradition but reconstitutes freedom as action and natal willing. By rejecting freedom as a matter of internal will, Arendt emphasizes its external and performative dimensions, linking it to the collective action foundational to political life (Arendt 1998).

6.6.4.3 Resistibility as a Hallmark of Political Authority

Arendt’s concept of resistibility is central to her understanding of political authority. Genuine authority, she contends, invites action rather than imposing it. Absolute commands, by contrast, are inherently antipolitical because they compel rather than persuade, undermining the public space of freedom and deliberation (Honig 1991). Resistibility ensures that authority remains participatory and dialogic, fostering a commitment to shared life over personal will.

Arendt critiques the irresistible nature of divine commands, self-evident truths, and natural laws, which she characterizes as despotic. She argues that these forms of authority negate persuasion, demanding acquiescence and rendering them antipolitical. Unlike genuine authority, which relies on mutual recognition and shared legitimacy, the irresistibility of such commands eliminates the freedom and deliberation essential to political life (Arendt 1961, pp. 92-4). In this framework, resistibility distinguishes secular law from divine command,

and political authority from religious devotion. Political action must remain open to resistance; an appeal to absolutes is illicit because of its constative, finalizing character (Honig 1991). In summary, resistibility is central to Arendt's politics, as it safeguards the essential space for freedom and deliberation. By allowing authority to be questioned and challenged, resistibility fosters an environment where individuals are motivated to engage actively and collectively in shaping their shared world, ensuring that decisions and actions remain participatory and responsive to the needs of the community.

6.6.4.4 Performativity: The Creation of Political Realities

Arendt links performativity to resistibility through the unique nature of political action. For her, political action is not constative but performative—it brings “something into being which did not exist before” (Arendt 1961, p. 151). This performative act is inherently public and collective, generating new realities through mutual acknowledgment rather than individual autonomy.

Central to this performative process is Arendt's concept of natality, which highlights action as the essence of human freedom. Freedom, in this sense, enables individuals to speak and act, creating spaces where resistibility and intrinsic motivations can flourish. The performative nature of political action rests on speech and freedom, reducing the coercive weight of authority and power while enabling new beginnings.

As Arendt observes, the act of foundation, such as establishing governments, constitutions, and laws, is a performative act through which a collective generates its own authority. For example, foundational declarations like “we hold these truths to be self-evident” are acts of collective will that create legitimacy through mutual agreement (Arendt 1990, pp. 192-3). On this account, power and authority are interdependent, both emerging from and sustained by collective speech and action.

6.6.4.5 Speech and Action

Action within the human condition serves to reveal the unique identity of each individual, expressed through both action and speech in the context of plurality. Uniqueness, while rooted in individual existence, must be shared and distinguished through actions and words in the public realm.

Plurality ensures that humans are distinct from one another by virtue of birth, but this distinctness is fully realized only through self-expression. For Arendt, action reveals who we are, while speech allows us to make that identity comprehensible to others. Without speech, action would lose its revelatory quality: “It would lose its subject, as it were,” and become mechanical or robotic (Arendt 1998, p. 178). Speech thus invests action with personal meaning, allowing individuals to claim and own their actions as expressions of their identity.

6.7 ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Ethical responsibility, as a cornerstone of Practical Deconstruction, emerges as a profound commitment to align actions with shared values and a unified sense of obligation to act in ways that bring about this commitment through thoughtful engagement in the continuous creation of meaning. This responsibility reflects humanity’s dual capacity for innovation, captured by Arendt’s notion of natality, and for relational engagement, as illuminated by both her exploration of performative action and Derrida’s focus on *différance* and the instability of meaning.

6.7.1 Ethical Creation

Ethical responsibility, in this context, is not just the duty to act but to act in ways that reflect care for others and the shared world we inhabit. Through action, individuals bring unprecedented possibilities into being, transforming the web of human relationships and contributing to the collective narratives that define communities.

This process of creation, however, is not value neutral. The newness brought forth through natality must be tempered by an ethical awareness of its broader consequences. Ethical responsibility, therefore, involves a deliberate reflection on the potential impacts of our actions on others, as well as a commitment to fostering inclusion, justice, and flourishing within the shared spaces where freedom and action intersect (Arendt 1998).

6.7.2 Relational Meaning

As Arendt situates performativity within the public realm, where action unfolds in the presence of others and derives its significance from the relational context in which it occurs, so ethical responsibility entails an acute awareness of how our words and deeds resonate within the collective fabric of human interaction. Each act of speech or expression contributes to the co-creation of a shared reality, making the performative dimension of action central to ethical engagement (Arendt 1998).

Derrida's concept of *différance* complements this view by emphasizing the iterative and relational nature of meaning. Ethical responsibility, in Derrida's framework, involves a recognition of the fluidity and deferral of meaning; how every act of communication or decision contributes to an ongoing process of reinterpretation (Derrida 1982). This perspective invites us to approach ethical action with humility, acknowledging that meaning is never fully present or stable, but is continually shaped by the interplay of relationships, contexts, and our own ethical meaning making within this interplay.

6.7.3 Meaning-Making as an Ethical Imperative

Drawing on Kant's insights into the metaphysical drive to seek meaning, ethical responsibility can also be understood as a commitment to nurture this intrinsic human desire; not only for oneself but for the community. Humans are driven to craft significance through their actions, to inscribe meaning onto the world, and to construct narratives that bind individuals together in shared understanding.

Arendt's insights into natality and performativity reinforce this perspective. Natality reflects the human need to create and innovate, while performativity highlights the relational and public nature of this process. Derrida's notion of *arche-writing* deepens this understanding, suggesting that all forms of expression, speech, action, and gesture, constitute a form of writing that inscribes our existence onto the world (Derrida 1997). Ethical responsibility, then, becomes a commitment to ensuring that the meanings we create contribute positively to the shared world, respecting its plurality and fostering collective flourishing.

6.7.4 Ethical Responsibility as an Act of Care

Ultimately, ethical responsibility transcends individual action, reflecting a profound recognition of our interdependence and the relational dynamics of the human condition. For Derrida, this responsibility is inherently *aporetic*, involving decisions made in the absence of absolute certainty or stable ground. The act of deciding, for Derrida, is an ethical act precisely because it confronts the undecidable and acknowledges the impossibility of a perfect solution (Derrida 1995).

In embracing ethical responsibility, we acknowledge not only our capacity to act but the weight of accountability that accompanies it. This process demands a balance between spontaneity and reflection, innovation and tradition, and individual aspiration and collective wellbeing.

6.8 DIFFÉRANCE

This term was coined by Derrida, blending "deferral" and "difference," to illustrate that no word or symbol can possess a fixed, intrinsic meaning (Derrida 1997). Instead, meaning arises relationally, through the intricate web of distinctions and associations within language. For instance, the word "tree" derives its significance not from an intrinsic essence but from its juxtaposition against "bush" and "plant," and its resonance with "branch," "leaf," "trunk," and "forest." This relational nature of language highlights its inherently negational character—meaning is constituted by what something is not.

Derrida's insight destabilizes the assumption of fixed truths, revealing meaning to be perpetually deferred and endlessly evolving. Because words only acquire meaning through their difference from and relation to other words, they can never fully arrive at a singular, definitive interpretation. This dynamic interplay ensures that codifiable truths—those we attempt to articulate, record, and institutionalize—are intrinsically unstable and contingent.

The implications of *différance* extend beyond linguistic theory into the practical realm of institutional structures and methodologies. Documents, frameworks, and standardized processes, even when designed with rigor and in good faith, aim to codify truths that are, by their very nature, fluid and context dependent. These systems aspire to provide clarity and order, yet they can never fully capture the complexities and contingencies of the dynamic realities they seek to manage. Indeed, Derrida's insights challenge us to recognize that in certain circumstances, fidelity to a standardized methodology might demand its reinterpretation or even its contravention.

By exposing the instability at the heart of codified systems, *différance* invites us to approach such frameworks with both a critical eye and an openness to the unforeseen, reminding us that every structure must accommodate the shifting terrain of the reality it seeks to address.

6.8.1 Limits

A limit serves several purposes. It defines the boundaries of a particular field, establishing its scope. Its functions as a passage, enabling transition from one domain to another or into an undefined, limitless expanse. Finally, it establishes differentiation by creating relationships between opposing yet interconnected fields (Cao 2020). These roles highlight the complex and paradoxical nature of limits as both constraining and enabling forces.

Derrida (1993) suggests that the act of closure, the delineation of a field, involves both projection and protection. When a boundary is established, the field becomes sanctioned, governed by rules, and monitored. This boundary functions as a demarcation that defines the field in contrast to its outside, introducing counterpoints and heterogeneity between the field and the non-field (Sanchez Gomez 2022). This dynamic reveals the interdependent nature of fields and their boundaries.

Consider Heidegger's differentiation between human and animal being. These terms are understood relationally, where "human" is defined in contrast to "animal" and vice versa. This distinction is inherently contradictory because the definition of "human" invokes the concept of "animal," making the two terms inseparable in their differentiation (Glendinning 1996). The act of defining boundaries thus introduces interdependencies, where the field cannot exist independently of its non-field.

The modalities of limitation, including field closure, non-field opening, and inter-field contestation, reflect the paradox at the heart of limits. For Derrida, the aporia, or the impassable barrier, lies within the concept of limits itself. Definitions that reveal contradictions and interdependencies, such as "human" and "animal," emerge because of the aporia. This impasse necessitates the creation of boundaries, which are never fully resolved or fixed.

As an example, the boundary between accounting and economics illustrates the dual nature of limits. This boundary defines the scope of accounting as a discipline and differentiates it from economics. At the same time, it serves as a passage, enabling interaction and dialogue between the two fields. To establish where accounting ends and economics begins, the boundary must engage with the openness of economics. The definition of accounting reflects its relationship with economics, showing that limits are both barriers and gateways.

Limits, therefore, arise from the aporia, the point of tension that necessitates definition. As Derrida's concept of *différance* highlights, limits reflect our intrinsic need to define and differentiate, even as they reveal the shifting and deferred nature of meaning itself. The language of limits embodies our ongoing struggle to grapple with the finite and relational dimensions of existence, showing how boundaries are shaped by the openness they aim to constrain (Raffoul 2008).

6.8.2 Lines

The concept of the line, or linearization, is often evoked by the image of a straight path or an arrow. In Derrida's work, this concept carries profound implications, drawing on historical perspectives such as Aristotle's and Newton's views of time as a sequence of consecutive "now" points along a forward-moving trajectory. Derrida critiques this view by showing that language inherently represents time as a chain of moments that are always either before or after the present. This structure leads to a perpetual postponement of fixed meaning, a phenomenon central to his notion of *différance* (Derrida 1993).

The problem, or *aporia*, with thinking of time as a straight line arises from the way this concept simultaneously requires and defies clarity. Movement, as Aristotle framed it, depends on the relational concepts of "before" and "after," but the linear representation of time, composed of points that are both ends and beginnings, introduces inherent contradictions. The line becomes a symbol of both continuity and constraint, revealing the limits of our ability to conceptualize time without simplifying its fluid nature (Falcon 2013).

Consider, for example, a movie reel. A film consists of individual frames, each corresponding to a specific "now." When viewed in sequence, these frames create the illusion of continuous motion. The progression from one frame to the next relies on the concepts of "before" and "after," which align with the linear representation of time. However, this representation is incomplete because it reduces the fluid experience of watching a movie to a series of discrete, static moments. This paradox illustrates how the linear framework is simultaneously necessary for understanding progression and insufficient for capturing the lived experience.

Derrida's critique echoes earlier insights from Bergson (1911), who argued that our lived experience of time is not linear but fluid and continuous. Despite this, attempts to explain temporal experiences often rely on the codification of time into linear representations. These representations, while useful for analysis and communication, wrestle with the *aporia* inherent in the non-linear nature of real temporal experience. Instead of fully capturing time as it is lived, they frequently revert to discussing motion or movement, revealing the persistent gap between linguistic and conceptual representation and the realities they seek to describe.

Derrida's work thus reveals the limitations of the line as a conceptual tool for representing time. While it remains indispensable for structuring our understanding, the line also

demonstrates the tension between the necessity of definition and the elusiveness of lived experience.

6.8.3 Circle

Derrida explores the concept of the temporal circle, suggesting that the linear representation of time inherently loops back on itself, where the line becomes a circle and linearity morphs into a plane (Derrida 1989). This circularity highlights the paradoxes in temporal conceptualization: time is simultaneously "now" and "not-now," embodying measured movement without being the measure itself. It reveals the limitations of linear representations and compels constant re-evaluation of our understanding of time and space.

Derrida critiques the idealization process in geometry, including the circle, as detached from immediate sensory experience. The circle, while ostensibly resolving the shortcomings of the line, introduces its own paradoxes, becoming another geometric abstraction laden with contradictions (Derrida 1989). These insights disrupt the notion of geometry as a straightforward narrative of progress and expose the interplay between perception and idealization.

The circle metaphorically represents a richer, more nuanced understanding of time, where each point is simultaneously an end and a beginning, reflecting the continuous and bounded nature of temporality. However, as Derrida highlights, the circle fails to transcend the paradoxes of linear time and instead relocates the problem. For example, Aristotle's conception of time as a sequence of 'nows' is both necessary and deeply problematic because it relies on the concepts of 'before' and 'after,' embedding temporal flow within a paradoxical structure of continuity and discreteness (Falcon 2013).

Consider the 24-hour cycle used to represent a day. It acknowledges time's cyclical repetition, addressing linear time's limitations. However, this model simplifies the day into a repetitive loop, disregarding the uniqueness of lived experiences within each cycle. While the circle captures temporal continuity, it fails to account for time's fluid and ever-changing nature. Thus, the circular model introduces a new set of contradictions, failing to fully reconcile our understanding of temporality.

Derrida encapsulates this aporia in our representation of time: movement depends on "before" and "after," yet linear time remains fundamentally flawed. While the circular model attempts to address these issues, it too falls short. We experience time not as purely linear or circular

but as a more fluid and intricate phenomenon. This highlights the deeper aporia: while our linguistic and cognitive tools are insufficient to fully capture the complexity of lived temporal flow, our embodied experience intuitively navigates these paradoxes.

6.9 CODIFIABLE & INEFFABLE TRUTHS

6.9.1 Codifiable truths

The Codifiable truths refer to aspects of knowledge and practices that can be explicitly documented and communicated using formal language and structures. These truths are built iteratively through associations with other words, creating an extensive chain where each term explains another. This recursive process echoes Ferdinand de Saussure's relationship between the signifier (e.g., the word 'dog') and the signified (the concept of 'dog') (Key & Noble 2017). However, this linkage is a normative construct that evolves over time and varies across languages.

This aspect of language aligns with Derrida's concept of arche-writing, suggesting that the fundamental structure of difference and deferral underlies all forms of linguistic expression (Derrida 1997). Arche-writing challenges the conventional distinction between speech and writing, proposing that all linguistic output is constructed through a network of differential relationships and deferrals, which Derrida terms *différance*.

Codifiable truths encompass facets of knowledge that can be explicitly documented, such as standardized procedures, best practices, tools, and frameworks intended to systematize oversight. However, the effort to codify dynamic and mutable aspects of reality into definitive terms is fraught with intrinsic contradictions. While these codified truths strive to provide clarity and guidance, they inherently fall short of capturing the full spectrum of experiences, adaptability, and tacit knowledge acquired through direct engagement.

The process of codifying truths can be viewed through the lens of Derrida's *différance*, which highlights the challenges of defining or expressing truths in absolute terms (Derrida 1982). When attempting to codify knowledge, we are compelled to define concepts in relation to what they are not, leading to an endless deferral of fixed meaning. This dynamic suggests that codifiable truths are not static but are subject to continual evolution, shaped by contextual influences, temporal shifts, and individual interpretations.

By acknowledging the inherent limitations of language and the perpetual instability of meanings, Derrida's theories prompt us to recognize that even codified knowledge is provisional. Reality, therefore, cannot be fully captured or communicated through language alone, highlighting the importance of embracing the ineffable—those elements of our experience that resist direct articulation but are nonetheless crucial for understanding complex practices (Derrida 1988).

6.9.2 Ineffable truths

In stark contrast to codifiable truths, ineffable truths represent the deeply felt elements of our personal experience that defy articulation. These truths underpin our habits, intuitions, and subconscious understandings. The idea that "we can know more than we can tell" illuminates the vast repository of knowledge that operates beneath the surface of explicit codifiable communication, and is crucial in understanding the power of ineffable truths as the drivers for our action (Polanyi 2009, p. 4).

Ineffable truths are described as an "active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge," suggesting that our understanding is dynamically shaped by particulars that are not explicitly known yet important to us (Polanyi 2009, p. 6). Therefore, ineffable truths lead to skills and insights that cannot be fully articulated but are essential for practical knowledge. Take, for instance, a pianist: no amount of theoretical knowledge about music can fully substitute for the tacit understanding that enables a performance. It is through this tacit dimension that the pianist's fingers move instinctively over the keys, not only without conscious awareness but in such a way that conscious awareness would impede the performance of producing music that transcends mere notes on a page.

Insights from ineffable truths serve as a reminder that codifiable truths can never replace the nuanced understanding forged through experience and practice. Though ineffable truths evade articulation in language, they manifest profoundly in our decision-making processes and actions. These truths form the bedrock of practical wisdom, steering our responses in the unpredictable currents of project work and life itself. By acknowledging the importance of ineffable truths, we champion a more holistic approach to meaning making and action—one that values the unspoken, where intuition, rather than rigid logic, guides our behaviours and decisions.

6.10 THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PRACTICAL DECONSTRUCTION

Here we introduce the philosophical foundations of Practical Deconstruction by explaining the key theoretical contributions of Deconstruction and Arche-Writing. These concepts, derived from Derrida's work, provide the intellectual basis for the reflective and adaptive practices that Practical Deconstruction embodies.

6.10.1 Deconstruction: Understanding Truth

Derrida's method of deconstruction is central to understanding the philosophical grounding of Practical Deconstruction. It challenges binary oppositions and reveals the instability inherent in the meanings we ascribe to categories and concepts. This instability is especially relevant to the domain of project managing, where binary oppositions like planning vs. execution, standardization vs. flexibility, and control vs. creativity often obscure the fluid realities of practice.

Through deconstruction, we uncover how these binaries are socially constructed to simplify undecidable situations, or *aporia* (Derrida 1997, pp. 41-2). For instance, the distinction between project management and project managing can often feel clear-cut in theory but becomes blurred in practice, where managers adapt and deviate to navigate uncertainties. Deconstruction invites us to question these binaries and explore the interplay between their terms, opening space for innovation and new understandings.

Derrida contends that even in binary constructs, one side is often privileged over the other. For example, speech is traditionally valued for its perceived immediacy and dynamism, while writing is seen as static and detached. Derrida goes further, arguing that both speech and writing are themselves privileged over a more fundamental form of communication, which he terms *arche-writing* (Derrida 1997, pp. 60-1).

Deconstruction also reshapes our notion of truth. As Derrida observes, truth is not fixed or immutable but contingent and shaped by context and interpretation (Derrida 1997). What we perceive as truth is merely a fleeting moment in an endless interplay of meanings—what Derrida terms *différance* (Derrida 1973, 1978). This dynamic nature of truth highlights the importance of Practical Deconstruction as a framework for navigating the evolving realities of project managing.

6.10.2 Arche-Writing: Writing Meaning onto the World

Arche-writing expands the scope of deconstruction by suggesting that all human expression—whether through speech, gestures, or actions—constitutes a form of "writing" on the world. This concept is foundational to understanding Practical Deconstruction, as it emphasizes the embodied, performative, and temporally dynamic nature of meaning-making.

Derrida challenges the traditional confines of writing, proposing that communication transcends speech and text to encompass all forms of human expression. Arche-writing highlights how gestures, actions, and the marks we leave upon the world—both physical and emotional—contribute to meaning-making. These inscriptions are not merely passive; they shape and are shaped by the relationships, environments, and experiences that define us (Derrida 2001).

6.10.3 Temporality and the Trace

Central to the concept of arche-writing is its temporal dimension. Derrida argues that language collapses the past and the future into the present through the mechanism of the trace. The trace refers to a mark or sign that something is absent, indicating that meaning is not fixed but rather fluid and dependent on context. Every act of expression carries with it the remnants of what has come before, while simultaneously gesturing toward future reinterpretations. In this sense, arche-writing encapsulates the interplay of memory, anticipation, and the lived moment. This dynamic highlights the impossibility of fixed meaning, as every mark we make is subject to reinterpretation, shaped by the shifting contexts of time and space (Derrida 1997).

For instance, when we communicate, we draw upon words and symbols that carry historical weight, each shaped by their previous uses. Simultaneously, we use these symbols with an awareness—or perhaps a hope—that they will carry meaning forward, to be understood in contexts yet to come. This temporal interplay reveals how arche-writing structures our engagement with the world, enabling us to craft meaning through our interactions, even as those meanings remain fluid and open-ended.

6.10.4 Everyday Acts as Arche-Writing

Consider the simple act of baking a cake. More than a culinary exercise, it is a gesture rich with meaning—a tangible expression of care, affection, or celebration. Similarly, the way we arrange our living spaces reflects our identities, values, and aspirations. These acts of arche-

writing inscribe our existence onto the fabric of reality, leaving traces that others may interpret and build upon (Derrida 2001).

Arche-writing also encompasses the marks left on social structures and human relationships. A carefully chosen word, an empathetic action, or even a deliberate silence can inscribe profound meaning, reshaping the dynamics of a conversation, a relationship, or an entire community. Through these gestures, we are both authors and recipients of meaning, engaged in a continuous process of interpreting and reinterpreting the world around us.

6.10.5 Implications for Practical Deconstruction

Arche-writing reveals the inherent instability of codified truths, as each codification is itself an inscription subject to the dynamics of temporality and reinterpretation. This instability does not undermine the value of codified knowledge but highlights its provisional nature, inviting a more dynamic and adaptive approach to meaning-making.

Through arche-writing, we see that every decision, action, or deviation is an inscription on the world that carries the weight of past contexts while opening new possibilities for the future. This concept thus serves as a critical lens for Practical Deconstruction, illuminating how human expression operates at the intersection of structure and fluidity, tradition and innovation, the known and the ineffable.

6.11 DISCUSSION: MAKING THE CASE FOR PROJECT MANAGING AS AN EMBODIMENT OF PRACTICAL DECONSTRUCTION

Table 6: Dimensions of Practical Deconstruction and Their Embodiment in Project Managing, as Revealed in the Thesis Studies

Dimension of Practical Deconstruction	Revealed in the Studies
Intrinsic Motivation	• “Yeah, I think it’s the challenge of it. I think it’s the fact that you’re always trying to solve a problem. And I think that’s what drives me, is that I like solving problems. And I like the fact that every project is different” (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024) • “You start on a road without a beginning, an end, a budget, or scope, yet we are still meant to create options and a timeframe” (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024)
Aporia	• “you can go get a stakeholder that goes and throws an obstacle in your way. If you can challenge that obstacle or you could actually find a way around it to deliver” (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024) • “Between the internal bureaucratic paperwork and red tape ... agencies want funds expended in this financial year ... you’re always looking for ways around the processes” (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024)
Action	• “We completely changed the approach, so yeah, yeah, 100%. So, we went to a more agile methodology and sort of – went from there” (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024)

	• “We had to take a step back and re-evaluate our approach. We looked at the project lifecycle and identified areas where we could improve our processes and procedures” (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024)
Natality	• “You start on a road without a beginning, an end, a budget, or scope, yet we are still meant to create options and a timeframe” (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024) • “We had to find creative solutions that met the requirements of the project while also pushing the boundaries of what was possible” (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024)
Ethical Responsibility	• “So, we worked collaboratively with the contractor. The contract basically went in the bottom drawer, and it was a team effort, we didn’t have one dispute, we didn’t have one falling out” (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024) • “I think the biggest challenge is the fact that we’re dealing with public money and the public has a right to know what we’re doing with their money” (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024)
Différance	• “What you do is you bend the system as far as you possibly can, but you don’t break it. If you understand the system, you can manipulate it and get it to do what you need it to do” (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024)
Codifiable vs. Ineffable Truths	• “the PMBOK® is there to put you in the ballpark of things to think about” (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024) • “Instead of going through the correct processes ... we found that because I was comfortable with my knowledge in the situation, and the efficiencies that it provided, that’s why we went down that path” (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024)

6.11.1 Intrinsic Motivation

Project managers are drawn to project work by the physiological and psychological satisfaction it provides, as well as the unique challenges that foster creativity and growth. These motivations align with Derrida’s arche-writing, which emphasizes the continuous creation of meaning, and Arendt’s natality, reflecting the capacity for new beginnings. These elements resonate with the adaptive strategies highlighted by Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024), where project managers navigate rigid bureaucratic frameworks with strategic discretion to achieve fulfilment and progress.

Project work encompasses a range of stress-inducing factors, such as excessive demands, inadequate resources, unclear responsibilities, job instability, and internal power struggles. These challenges can lead to anxiety, depression, and physical illnesses (Darling & Whitty 2019). However, the intense, high-pressure nature of project work also elicits a profound sense of accomplishment and exhilaration. As one project manager expressed, “even the really bad ones. I get a buzz out of it, and I keep going back for more” (Whitty 2010, p. 29). This blend of stress and satisfaction echoes the dynamics described by (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024), who articulate how public sector project managers derive authority and autonomy by adapting and negotiating established frameworks such as PRINCE2 and PMBOK®.

The state of flow—intense concentration and engagement—often experienced by project managers, reflects their ability to balance their skills with the demands of their work (van der

Hoorn 2015). This immersive experience aligns with the "Pragmatic Comportment Compass" (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024), which identifies behaviours like using, manipulating, or circumventing formal processes to maintain project momentum and navigate complex situations. The desire to continue on under these high-pressure conditions can be attributed to one of the consequences of being in flow which is that the intense concentration and engagement makes experiences of physical and mental discomfort, and even pain recede.

Many individuals who sustain careers in project work find satisfaction in resolving disorder, complexity, and messiness, an emotional rollercoaster (van der Hoorn, B. & Whitty, J. 2015). Autonomy is a critical factor in this satisfaction, granting project managers the freedom to make decisions and feel accountable for them. Rowe, Whitty, & van der Hoorn (2024) highlight this interplay, showing how project managers derive authority and legitimacy by selectively adhering to or deviating from institutional norms. This flexibility transforms rigid frameworks into practical tools that foster a sense of ownership and purpose akin to an artist completing a masterpiece (van der Hoorn, B. & Whitty, J. 2016). Therefore, project work offers a deeply satisfying experience on a profound spiritual and emotional level (Sense & Fernando 2011).

It's not just seasoned professionals, young project managers are equally drawn to project work for its opportunities for learning and development, autonomy, and deriving a sense of meaning. For them, it's about learning to be flexible and quickly adapting to uncertain situations. They value the freedom to decide their course of action, knowing that the outcome is both their responsibility and opportunity. Their work aligns with their personal values and makes sense to them (Lechler & Huemann 2024).

Long-serving project managers also find fulfilment in the autonomy, authority, and sense of purpose it offers. They often navigate complexities in their own way, going beyond institutional protocols, which is akin to breaking free from constraints and free climbing, where they navigate obstacles with expert judgment and adaptive strategies (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024). They manage their work environments by suspending rigid principles and exercising discretion, akin to dismantling and transcending the binary oppositions of their bureaucratic constraints to deliver successful projects (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024). In the specific context of the public sector, these long serving project managers have chosen to stay in the public sector and therefore exhibit a sense of responsibility derived from the

knowledge that project deliverables use public money and therefore come with a social contract.

These perspectives illustrate how environments and tasks can act as selective forces, shaping behaviours and motivations in various domains, from ants and climbers to project managers. The passionate commitment project managers often display towards their work demonstrates how deeply they are engaged by the challenges and rewards of project environments (Connor, McDermott & Gillies 2022). Whitty (2010) likens this drive to a deep-seated 'thirst' for emotional and psychological satisfaction, where project managers actively seek projects that meet this intrinsic need. Much like gameplay, project work enables them to enter a state of flow, finding exhilaration in balancing complexity and control (van der Hoorn 2015). As emphasized by Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024), it is this combination of stress, challenge, and intrinsic reward that drives their continued engagement—not despite the complexities of project work, but because of them.

6.11.2 Aporia

Derrida's concept of *aporia*, representing moments of undecidability, offers a valuable lens for understanding the dilemmas project managers encounter. These moments arise when managers confront contradictions inherent in their roles, such as balancing competing priorities or reconciling conflicting organizational goals. These challenges reflect the fluid nature of project managing, where decisions often require navigating ambiguity and uncertainty. As a result of intrinsic motivation, these moments are not just seen as something to be navigated, but as welcome obstacles to be overcome.

For instance, the definition of a project as “a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result” relies on binary oppositions like “unique” versus “repetitive” and “temporary” versus “permanent.” Yet, in practice, projects frequently draw upon established methodologies, making their outcomes less than wholly unique. Similarly, many projects evolve into ongoing operations, blurring the line between temporality and permanence. As Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) explain, these contradictions compel project managers to rethink their approaches, negotiating the boundaries between theoretical ideals and practical applications.

In public sector project management, *aporia* is especially pronounced. Managers must continuously navigate binary oppositions such as "Scope vs. Constraint" or "Flexibility vs.

Control," described by Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) as both challenges and opportunities. These tensions demand reflection and self-evaluation, prompting managers to weigh trade-offs and pursue creative strategies. For example, the need to balance rigid compliance frameworks with the agility required for effective delivery often leads managers to innovate within constrained systems. Such moments of undecidability encourage pragmatic decision-making, where managers adapt theoretical guidelines to suit specific organizational contexts.

These moments also foster critical meaning-making processes. By embracing *aporia*, project managers transcend the limitations of binary thinking, finding ways to integrate opposing forces into coherent action. Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) highlight how these processes reflect a Derridean perspective: moments of tension are not obstacles but opportunities for transformation. Managers, through their decisions, dismantle and reconstruct organizational hierarchies and processes to meet project demands, revealing the creative potential within moments of undecidability.

Ultimately, *aporia* encapsulates the complex and dynamic reality of project managing, where binary oppositions are not resolved but negotiated. This negotiation process aligns with the adaptive strategies described in Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024), where managers employ discretion to navigate constraints and achieve successful outcomes. Through these strategies, project managers demonstrate that navigating *aporia* is not merely about overcoming dilemmas but about reimagining possibilities, fostering innovation, and achieving meaningful progress within the ambiguity of their roles.

6.11.3 Action

Arendt's concept of action emphasizes the capacity to initiate, interact with others, and influence change within a shared context. In project managing, this capacity manifests through the interplay between individual initiative and collaborative decision-making, often within environments resistant to rigid, codified processes. This dynamic highlights the creative and adaptive nature of project managing, where traditional structures are navigated and reshaped to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) illustrate how public sector project managers strategically suspend organizational processes or deviate from standardized protocols to address immediate contextual challenges. These deliberate actions are not acts of

noncompliance, but calculated manoeuvres designed to "open space" for creativity, innovation, and problem-solving. By temporarily setting aside rigid structures, project managers align their actions with the realities of their projects while maintaining a commitment to overarching goals. Such actions demonstrate a nuanced understanding of institutional norms, where discretion is exercised within acceptable boundaries, often with executive support to mitigate risks of institutional reprimand.

The suspension of rigid frameworks fosters an environment conducive to reflective practice, allowing managers to consider the relationship between past decisions, present challenges, and future opportunities. Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) emphasize that this reflective space is essential for fostering innovation, as it encourages project managers to step back and evaluate how their decisions align with evolving project dynamics. Within teams, this reflective environment supports collaborative problem-solving, where diverse perspectives converge to address complex issues, embodying Arendt's notion of plurality.

Plurality, as Arendt describes, highlights the inherently social nature of action. Public sector project managers operate within a web of relationships, where influence and counterinfluence shape project trajectories. They navigate competing interests, reconcile conflicting goals, and foster cohesion among stakeholders, embodying the interdependent nature of action. Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) illustrate this adaptability through the lens of street-level bureaucracy, where project managers exercise discretion to address local realities. By adapting standardized protocols to fit specific contexts, managers not only resolve immediate issues but also lay the groundwork for transformative practices that extend beyond individual projects.

This interdependent and adaptive approach highlights the transformative potential of action in project managing. Arendt's emphasis on the capacity to initiate aligns seamlessly with the strategic adaptability highlighted by Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) and Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024). Together, these perspectives demonstrate how project managers transcend rigid frameworks, fostering environments of innovation, collaboration, and change within the constraints of their organizational contexts.

6.11.4 Natality

Arendt's concept of natality reflects the human capacity to initiate, innovate, and bring something unprecedented into the world. Central to this is the principle of beginning, which

Arendt describes as “the very essence of action” (Arendt 1998, p. 9). For project managers, natality encapsulates their ability to navigate complex and uncertain environments, disrupting established norms to create transformative outcomes.

6.11.4.1 Natal Willingness

The readiness to act, or natal willingness, is foundational to natality. It represents the courage to initiate despite uncertainty or constraints. Project managers often display this willingness by stepping into ambiguous situations where outcomes are unpredictable. Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) emphasize how public sector project managers reinterpret past experiences and engage with binary oppositions—such as “Flexibility vs. Control”—to initiate new approaches. This willingness to take risks and embrace the unknown is essential for innovation and change within their roles.

6.11.4.2 Interconnectedness of Freedom and Action

Freedom, in Arendt’s view, is realized through action in the public sphere. It is not an internal state but an external, performative reality experienced when individuals collaborate to shape their shared world. For project managers, this freedom manifests in their ability to act spontaneously and collaboratively, responding to dynamic project conditions. Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) describe how project managers exercise discretion to navigate street-level bureaucratic constraints, aligning their actions with both immediate needs and long-term goals. This reflects a bounded freedom, where managers transcend limitations through creative and collective action.

6.11.4.3 Resistibility and Participatory Authority

Arendt’s idea of resistibility highlights the participatory nature of authority, where power emerges from mutual agreement and collective action rather than coercion. For project managers, resistibility ensures that authority remains dialogic and adaptable, fostering an environment where decisions are open to challenge and refinement. Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) note that public sector managers often suspend rigid frameworks to create space for reflection and collaboration, ensuring that actions remain responsive to the evolving needs of their projects. This openness to resistance not only sustains authority but also empowers managers to engage actively in shaping project realities.

6.11.4.4 Performativity: Creating New Realities

Arendt links natality to the performative nature of action, which brings “something into being which did not exist before” (Arendt 1961, p. 151). For project managers, this performativity is evident in their ability to transform abstract goals into tangible outcomes through collective effort. Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) highlight how managers harness reflective practices to reimagine possibilities and align their actions with emerging challenges. This performative aspect of natality highlights the transformative potential of project managing, where new beginnings arise from collaborative engagement and mutual acknowledgment.

6.11.4.5 Speech and Action

Speech and action are inseparable in Arendt’s conception of natality, as they reveal the unique identity of individuals within the collective sphere. For project managers, speech provides the means to articulate vision, negotiate competing interests, and foster cohesion among stakeholders. Action, in turn, actualizes these intentions, transforming ideas into shared realities. Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) describe how project managers leverage their authority to bring diverse perspectives into alignment, ensuring that their decisions reflect both individual expertise and collective purpose.

6.11.5 Ethical Responsibility

Ethical responsibility in project managing reflects the profound commitment to align actions with shared values and to engage thoughtfully in creating and sustaining meaning within organizational and societal contexts. This responsibility requires navigating tensions between individual autonomy and collective obligations, a dynamic captured by Derrida’s *arche-writing* and Arendt’s notion of freedom.

For public sector project managers, ethical responsibility is rooted in intrinsic values such as compassion, fairness, and a commitment to social justice. These values are not merely moral imperatives; they serve as practical tools that enhance resilience and adaptability. As Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) observe, aligning actions with these values empowers managers to navigate the rigid constraints of bureaucratic processes while addressing the immediate and long-term needs of their communities. This alignment embodies the relational and contextual dimensions of ethical responsibility, where decisions resonate within the web of human relationships. In this way, engaging in *aporia* is not just a challenge that the project manager derives meaning, challenge, and pleasure from, it also becomes a necessary action that must be taken so that ethical responsibilities can be upheld.

6.11.5.1 Ethical Creation

Ethical responsibility begins with the act of creation. Through their actions, project managers bring new possibilities into being, transforming relationships and contributing to collective narratives. This process, however, is not value-neutral. Ethical creation demands reflection on the potential impacts of decisions and a commitment to fostering inclusion, justice, and collective flourishing (Arendt 1998). For project managers, this reflection manifests in their ability to adapt project methodologies, ensuring outcomes align with the broader societal good. The tension inherent in these adaptations—balancing innovation with accountability—reflects the ethical imperative to act thoughtfully and with care.

6.11.6 Relational Meaning

The significance of ethical action lies in its relational context. As Arendt emphasizes, action unfolds in the presence of others, deriving meaning from its impact on the shared world (Arendt 1998). Similarly, Derrida's concept of *différance* highlights the fluid and iterative nature of meaning, where every act of decision-making contributes to a broader process of reinterpretation (Derrida 1982). For project managers, this relational meaning-making is evident in their interactions with stakeholders, where decisions are shaped by the collective fabric of human engagement. The *Pragmatic Comportment Compass* captures this dynamic, illustrating how managers selectively adopt, adapt, or circumvent organizational processes to balance efficiency with equity, ensuring project outcomes resonate ethically and contextually (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024).

6.11.7 Meaning-Making as an Ethical Imperative

Ethical responsibility also involves a commitment to fostering meaning within shared spaces. Humans are driven to craft significance through their actions, inscribing narratives that bind communities together. Project managers, as agents of ethical responsibility, engage in this meaning-making process by addressing tensions between idealized frameworks and real-world constraints. Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) emphasize that the flexibility to selectively engage with organizational protocols reflects an ethical dedication to outcomes that serve the greater good. This process mirrors Derrida's concept of *arche-writing*, where every action contributes to the ongoing inscription of meaning within a dynamic and interconnected world (Derrida 1997).

6.11.8 Ethical Responsibility as an Act of Care

Ultimately, ethical responsibility transcends individual actions, reflecting a profound recognition of interdependence and relational accountability. Derrida's notion of *aporia* highlights the undecidability inherent in ethical decision-making, where choices must be made despite the absence of absolute certainty (Derrida 1995). For project managers, this aporetic responsibility involves balancing spontaneity with reflection, ensuring their actions uphold both individual aspirations and collective wellbeing.

Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) illustrate how public sector project managers embody this responsibility by exercising discretion in navigating organizational processes. Through the *Pragmatic Comportment Compass*, managers selectively adapt, circumvent, or comply with formal procedures, demonstrating a commitment to care for their communities while meeting project objectives. This approach reflects an ethical orientation where actions are guided by compassion, equity, and a focus on the greater good.

Similarly, Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) highlight how project managers engage with the inherent tensions of public sector work—balancing constraints with opportunities for innovation. These managers often redefine traditional notions of compliance, using reflective practices to align immediate actions with broader ethical goals. Their ability to disrupt rigid processes while maintaining accountability exemplifies the relational dynamics central to ethical responsibility.

By embracing ethical responsibility, project managers navigate the complexities of organizational constraints and societal expectations with care, creativity, and accountability. As Arendt (1998) and Derrida (1982) remind us, ethical action is both a relational and performative act, one that shapes the shared world while respecting its plurality. In their pursuit of ethical outcomes, project managers embody the capacity to innovate and engage meaningfully, demonstrating that the essence of responsibility lies in the continuous negotiation of values, relationships, and possibilities.

6.11.9 Différance

Derrida's concept of *différance*, blending deferral and difference, illuminates the relational and evolving nature of meaning. For project managers, *différance* captures the fluid process of constructing and reconstructing meaning as they navigate dynamic and complex project environments. This perspective redefines project managers as active agents who reinterpret

and adapt plans, frameworks, and methodologies in response to ever-changing contexts, rather than simply executing predefined objectives.

The instability inherent in project definitions exemplifies *différance*. Projects are often characterized as unique and temporary, yet they frequently draw on established practices and extend beyond defined timelines, challenging these descriptors (Rowe, Whitty & van der Hoorn 2024). This fluidity compels project managers to continually reinterpret their objectives, adapt methodologies, and navigate evolving circumstances. Meaning in project managing emerges from the interplay of contrasts, between plans and realities, constraints and freedoms, and organizational ideals and practical demands.

6.11.9.1 Limits

Limits define the boundaries of scope, timelines, and resource allocations, serving both as constraints and enablers of action. These boundaries delineate what is included in a project while also creating opportunities for negotiation and reinterpretation. Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) describe how public sector project managers strategically adapt or even circumvent rigid methodologies to address shifting priorities and unforeseen challenges. This reflects Derrida's observation that limits simultaneously close and open fields of action, embodying the paradoxical nature of boundaries (Derrida 1993). Engaging critically with these limits allows project managers to embrace the iterative and adaptive processes central to their work, where each decision redefines the project's trajectory and outcomes.

6.11.9.2 Lines

The linear structures of project methodologies, such as timelines and sequential workflows, are designed to provide clarity and predictability. However, these structures often fail to capture the non-linear realities of project dynamics. Derrida critiques the reliance on linearity, arguing that it imposes artificial continuity on inherently fluid processes (Derrida 1993). Project managers encounter this tension when adhering to rigid timelines that may not account for emergent challenges or opportunities. Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) illustrate how project managers navigate these linear constraints by embracing iterative approaches that allow for recalibration and responsiveness, transforming static timelines into living guides for action.

6.11.9.3 Circles

Circular representations, such as iterative development cycles and feedback loops, offer an alternative to linear frameworks by emphasizing repetition, refinement, and interconnectedness. Yet, as Derrida (1989) notes, circularity introduces its own paradoxes, conflating continuity with boundedness. For project managers, frameworks like Agile embody this circular logic, allowing responsiveness but still operating within predefined cycles. Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) describe how public sector managers reinterpret these circular methodologies to reflect the unique and evolving demands of their contexts. By doing so, they demonstrate how even ostensibly flexible frameworks require ongoing negotiation to remain relevant and effective.

6.11.10 Codifiable vs. Ineffable Truths

Project managing exists at the confluence of codified knowledge and tacit understanding, embodying the interplay between formalized processes and intuitive decision-making. While codifiable truths offer structure, consistency, and predictability, ineffable truths provide the flexibility and insight required to navigate the complexities and uncertainties inherent in project environments. This duality highlights the dynamic and adaptive nature of project managing as a practice.

6.11.10.1 Codifiable Truths

Codifiable truths, encapsulated in frameworks such as PRINCE2 and PMBOK®, serve as foundational references for project managers. These frameworks aim to systematize oversight and establish benchmarks for excellence, offering a normative construct of project managing that emphasizes clarity and standardization. However, as Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) observe, these frameworks are inherently limited. They often fail to account for the fluid and unpredictable realities of project work, where the dynamic interplay of constraints, opportunities, and human factors resists codification.

The *Pragmatic Comportment Compass* illustrates how project managers engage with these codified systems. Managers adopt these frameworks when they align with project goals, adapt them to suit contextual demands, circumvent them when they become obstacles, and endure them when adherence is unavoidable (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024). This selective engagement highlights the limitations of codifiable truths and the need for complementary tacit knowledge to address the ambiguities of real-world projects.

6.11.10.2 Ineffable Truths

In contrast, ineffable truths encompass the tacit, experiential knowledge that defies explicit articulation. These truths emerge through action, reflection, and interaction, enabling project managers to navigate the grey areas of decision-making. As Polanyi (2009) argues, "we can know more than we can tell," emphasizing the profound role of intuition, habits, and subconscious understanding in shaping our responses to complex challenges.

For project managers, ineffable truths manifest in the ability to innovate and adapt under pressure, reconciling competing demands that codified systems cannot fully address. Akin to the pianist whose mastery extends beyond theoretical knowledge to an instinctive performance, project managers rely on tacit insights to deliver outcomes that transcend the constraints of formalized methodologies. These truths form the bedrock of practical wisdom, steering decisions in ways that rigid frameworks cannot anticipate or replicate.

6.11.10.3 The Dynamic Interplay

The relationship between codifiable and ineffable truths is not oppositional but symbiotic. Codifiable truths provide a necessary structure that supports consistency and accountability, while ineffable truths offer the adaptability needed to respond to unique and evolving circumstances. Together, they form a holistic approach to project managing, where structured methodologies are enriched by intuitive, experience-based insights.

Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) emphasize that the ability to balance these truths is central to effective project managing. By engaging critically with codified frameworks while embracing the ineffable dimensions of their work, project managers embody the adaptive and iterative processes central to practical deconstruction. This balance allows them to navigate the inherent tensions of their roles, transforming limitations into opportunities for innovation and growth.

In reconciling codifiable and ineffable truths, project managers illustrate Derrida's notion of *différance*. Meaning in their work is neither fixed nor fully articulable but emerges relationally, shaped by the interplay of explicit knowledge and tacit understanding. This dynamic highlights the transformative potential of project managing, where the boundaries of what is codifiable are expanded by the ineffable truths that drive human creativity and ingenuity.

6.11.11 Integrating Deconstruction and Arche-Writing into Project Managing

The philosophical foundations of Practical Deconstruction, rooted in Derrida's concepts of deconstruction and arche-writing, offer profound insights into the reflective and adaptive practices that underpin project managing. As illustrated in Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024) and Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024), project managers embody these principles through their navigation of codified frameworks and tacit knowledge, challenging static binaries and inscribing new meanings onto their project environments.

By engaging with binary oppositions such as "compliance vs. discretion" and "standardization vs. flexibility," project managers reveal the instability inherent in these constructs, opening pathways for innovation and transformation. The *Pragmatic Comportment Compass* exemplifies how managers operate within and beyond these binaries, adopting, adapting, circumventing, or enduring procedural constraints to meet the fluid demands of their work. This approach mirrors deconstruction's invitation to explore the interplay between oppositional terms, recognizing their contextual and relational nature.

Arche-writing deepens this perspective, emphasizing how every decision, adaptation, and action by project managers represents an inscription onto the fabric of their projects and organizations. These inscriptions carry the temporal weight of past experiences while gesturing toward future possibilities, encapsulating the iterative and performative dimensions of meaning-making. As Rowe, Whitty and Wheeldon (2024) demonstrate, project managers craft meaning through their dynamic engagement with codified systems and ineffable truths, navigating the interplay of structure and fluidity with care and creativity. Embedded in all, is the ethical responsibility that keeps these seasoned public service project managers at their desks, in the sense that their ethical responsibility holds and drives them towards the social contract they have agreed to uphold. In this way, they see themselves as the 'right' people to undertake this project managing pursuit.

Through these practices, project managers embody Practical Deconstruction, demonstrating how Derrida's philosophical principles extend beyond theory into the lived realities of organizational life. Their work highlights the importance of adaptability, reflection, and relational meaning-making in crafting outcomes that respect the instability of truth while addressing the complexities of human and institutional dynamics.

6.11.12 Practical Deconstruction as a Virtue

Practical Deconstruction, as explored throughout this work, embodies a form of virtue rooted in the courage to confront uncertainty, the ethical responsibility to serve the collective good, and the reflective capacity to adapt meaningfully to dynamic contexts. While at first glance, the adaptive and selective engagement with organizational rules—as described in the *Pragmatic Comportment Compass* (Rowe, Whitty & Wheeldon 2024)—might suggest that individuals are playing “fast and loose” with established protocols, this practice is, in fact, an expression of virtuous action.

Drawing on Arendt’s concept of action and natality, this approach reflects the willingness to initiate something new, to weave together codifiable truths and ineffable insights in ways that are appropriate to the situation, and to inscribe values that matter to the community. Far from mere opportunism or disregard for rules, Practical Deconstruction represents a commitment to what is valuable, ethical, and just within specific contexts. This exercise of judgment embodies practical wisdom; the capacity to discern and enact the right course of action at the right time, in response to the dynamic realities encountered.

Derrida’s notion of aporia, those moments of profound uncertainty, reveals the ethical core of Practical Deconstruction. In these moments, individuals do not recklessly abandon structure; rather, they engage in a thoughtful process of reflection, adaptation, and innovation. Navigating these uncertainties demands intrinsic motivation and a leap of faith; a faith rooted in one’s own judgment and capacity to act. Over time, this practice of trusting oneself in the face of ambiguity cements into the courage to back oneself, enabling individuals to pursue outcomes that align with the broader public good.

Public sector project managers, as described by Rowe, Whitty and van der Hoorn (2024), demonstrate this virtue when they suspend rigid principles to address immediate needs, exercising discretion to ensure that their actions remain aligned with ethical obligations. Their selective engagement with rules is not a rejection of organizational values but a commitment to upholding those values in practice, even when formal procedures fall short. This capacity to reconcile structure and adaptability reflects practical wisdom, the ability to discern and act on what is right within the constraints of the situation.

In this light, Practical Deconstruction is not just a method or a framework; it is an ethical stance and a virtuous practice. It acknowledges that true virtue lies not in blind compliance

but in the thoughtful, courageous pursuit of meaning, value, and justice. By embracing this approach, individuals become seekers and makers of meaning, shaping themselves and their communities through actions that honour the complexities of human existence.

THE PROJECTIFIED LIFE



Public Sector Projectification: When executives finally realize that the best way to deliver on promises is to empower project managers to clear the bureaucratic path ahead.

Plate 4: Projectification: Enabling the Path to Deliverance

PLATE 4 ILLUSTRATION

Plate 4: Projectification – Enabling the Path to Deliverance brings the thesis’s central insight into bold relief. It captures the paradox of modern project work in the public sector: surrounded by bureaucracy and burdened by policy, progress remains possible, but only because projectification clears the path. The Plate delivers a clear and urgent message: all must get out of the project manager’s way.

The image shows towering stacks of documents rising on either side, labelled with titles such as “Policy,” “PM101,” and “Governance.” Together, they form an overwhelming bureaucratic corridor. These stacks are not simply context. They can be obstacles. Their scale and orderliness represent a system that privileges compliance over momentum and procedure over discretion. Yet the scene is not inert. It is alive with motion.

At the centre stands a project manager in a high-visibility vest, arms open in a posture of activation. A glowing halo signifies their anointed authority and autonomy, not granted from above but conferred through projectification itself. At their feet, the word “Projectification” radiates, marking the cleared space in which judgment and action become possible. This is not a controller, but a facilitator, one who holds open the path so others can move.

The surrounding crowd of project workers surges forward, no longer blocked or delayed. Their movement is purposeful, converging toward the golden chalice of the “Deliverable.” This is not a trophy or an empty performance metric. It is a symbol of shared purpose, of public value, of meaningful completion. The project manager does not lead from the front. They lead by clearing space, holding the tension between institutional demands and the urgency of progress.

This Plate also reveals a final thread woven throughout the thesis. We are witnessing practical deconstruction in action. The project manager does not destroy structure but opens it. They make space within the procedural weight of the system, not by rejecting it outright, but by working through it. They unpick and reweave the institutional fabric just enough to let real progress move. In this sense, projectification is not only a system of delivery. It is a lived act of judgment, care, and quiet resistance. The call is clear. If we want delivery, the path must be cleared, and project managers must be trusted to clear it.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

A Day in the Life of Alex Morgan: A Postmodern Tapestry

Alex Morgan woke to the muted vibration of her phone on the nightstand, a sound somehow more insistent than an actual alarm clock. The morning light angled through the blinds, casting faint stripes across a single framed painting hung on the far wall; something she'd painted herself in a rare stretch of free time, a swirl of colours that had never quite resolved into anything definitive. This didn't bother her. Not everything had to make sense.

7:30 AM: The Meeting Before the Meeting

In a municipal conference room, its walls adorned with a poster that read, "Streamlining Processes for Better Communities," Alex sat across from a team of community representatives. The phrase felt like something spat out by ChatGPT to simulate corporate optimism, a hollow echo of institutional rhetoric designed to inspire yet somehow falling short; a shiny veneer that couldn't quite hide the underlying complexities. The irony wasn't lost on her.

The room hummed with tension: voices rising, papers shuffling, chairs creaking as people leaned forward or slumped back depending on whether they felt heard or ignored.

"Let's start with the drainage plan," Alex said, flipping open her notebook to a fresh page. The engineer started first, gesturing broadly as if the force of his hands could push through technical hurdles. Before he'd finished, a local resident interrupted.

"That's all great," she said, her voice sharp, "but what about the flooding near my daughter's school? We've been ignored for years!"

Alex deliberately paused, letting the frustration hang in the air long enough for everyone to feel it. This was the moment where some project managers, in a different organization, might turn to process, to the comforting rigidity of bureaucratic protocol. But projectification here wasn't a cage; it was a framework meant to enable, not restrict.

"You're absolutely right," Alex said finally, her voice even. "Let's connect the technical solution to your lived reality. Maybe there's a way to pilot something near the school."

It wasn't a perfect answer—perfect answers didn't exist in her line of work—but it was enough to redirect the conversation, enough to remind everyone that the space they occupied wasn't just for solving problems but for holding conflicting perspectives long enough to shape something workable.

10:00 AM: The Deconstruction Zone

Later, Alex found herself at the site of an urban redevelopment project. Bulldozers grumbled in the background, their low, mechanical growls blending with the hum of nearby traffic and the occasional burst of laughter from a group of contractors. The scene

was chaos, but a kind of chaos Alex understood intuitively, the way a jazz musician understands improvisation—structured but unpredictable, held together by invisible logic.

Her tablet buzzed—a message from a bureaucrat at the deputy mayor's office:
"Need final cost projections. Push for consensus with stakeholders. No surprises, Alex."

Consensus, she thought, wasn't a destination; it was a direction, a horizon you moved toward without ever fully reaching. It was less about arriving at a single truth and more about creating a pathway where contradictions could coexist, where progress emerged not from resolution but from the productive tension between divergent views.

She glanced at a mural on a nearby wall, a vivid tangle of eyes and clocks and hands painted by a local artist collective. Beneath it, someone had spray-painted: *WHO OWNS TIME?*

"Who owns time indeed," Alex muttered, smiling.

Rules, she knew, were bendable, if you knew where to press. But today, she didn't need to bend anything—her executive team had already structured the conditions for her to act. She turned to the lead contractor.

"Can we adjust the timeline to stagger construction zones? It might cost a little more upfront, but it'll keep community disruptions manageable."

The contractor frowned. *"That'll depend on approvals."*

"Approvals shouldn't be a barrier here. Let's reframe it as an opportunity," Alex replied. *"Fewer disruptions mean more public buy-in, which helps everyone in the long run. We'll sort out the paperwork in parallel."*

Her executive trusted her to make these calls, not explicitly but implicitly. It was an unspoken agreement: she would navigate the rigid frameworks of institutional processes, bending where necessary, and in return, she would deliver results that justified the bending. Alex didn't think of this as breaking rules; she thought of it as interpreting them — generously.

1:00 PM: Lunch in the Margins

A street vendor's coffee cart provided a brief reprieve. Alex was halfway through a falafel wrap when Zoe, a junior project analyst from her team, appeared, juggling a notebook, her phone, and a paper cup of iced coffee. Zoe looked harried.

"I'm stuck," she admitted after a laugh that sounded more like a sigh. *"The community forum feedback—it's all over the place. Some people want faster roads; others want pedestrian zones. It's like no one's speaking the same language."*

Alex chewed thoughtfully, then said, *"Maybe they're not. And maybe that's okay. Your job isn't to force alignment; it's to find where the contradictions overlap, where they create tension. That's where the potential is, where innovation can spark from the friction of differing perspectives, creating something wholly unexpected yet undeniably valuable."*

Zoe blinked. *"Tension?!"*

"Common tension," Alex clarified. *"Think of it as raw material. It's messy, but it's what you work with."*

Zoe nodded slowly, her expression shifting from confusion to something like relief. Alex watched her go; the notebook now clutched with a little more confidence. She had the distinct feeling she'd just taught something she herself was still learning.

3:00 PM: The Stakeholder Dance

By mid-afternoon, Alex was back in another meeting, this time with an oversight committee. The economist argued for austerity measures; the environmental advocate countered with a plea for more green spaces. The discussion spiralled into the familiar back-and-forth that threatened to consume all the oxygen in the room.

"Everyone here wants the same thing," Alex interrupted, her tone measured but firm. *"A project that works. But 'works' means different things depending on who you ask. So, let's try something else: What are you afraid might happen if your priorities aren't met?"*

The economist frowned, then spoke. The advocate followed. Slowly, hesitantly, a framework began to emerge. Not a perfect solution but a mosaic of overlapping priorities that reflected the messy, relational process Alex had come to see as the heart of her work.

6:00 PM: Reflections in Fragments

Back at home, Alex stood in her kitchen, sipping tea from a mug with a faint crack along the handle, a flaw she'd grown fond of. She stared at one of her half-finished paintings propped against the wall. The abstract swirl of overlapping shapes mirrored the day she'd just lived; fragments of competing priorities, perspectives, and possibilities, interwoven into a tapestry of relational meaning.

Her notebook lay open on the counter. She picked up a pen and jotted down a thought:

Projects are about resolving problems by holding open a space where diverse opinions and perspectives can coexist, allowing new and innovative solutions to emerge.

She set the pen down, took another sip of tea, and glanced back at the painting. In its chaos, she saw the day reflected: a series of contradictions that somehow made sense together.

Tomorrow, she thought, would bring more of the same—and she wouldn't have it any other way.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The lived reality of project managing is a dynamic, tension-filled negotiation between structure and flexibility, authority and autonomy, rigidity and discretion. *A Day in the Life of Alex Morgan* illustrates the intricate interplay of institutional constraints, stakeholder expectations, and the interpretive agency exercised by project managers. Alex navigates meetings, stakeholder conflicts, and bureaucratic expectations not as a passive executor of predefined methodologies but as an active participant in shaping project outcomes. Her day embodies the essence of practical deconstruction: the ability to act, adjust, and decide in the moment while balancing competing pressures.

Alex Morgan is a distinct kind of project manager. Not all public sector project managers are entrusted with her level of autonomy and power; she has developed competencies deemed exceptional by her executive. She represents a seasoned projectified public soldier, a professional who thrives in the complexity and uncertainty of public sector project managing. While some project managers leave the profession due to shifting conditions and the time-intensive nature of social projects, Alex embraces the challenges, ambiguity, and strategic manoeuvring required to succeed in such an environment.

This discussion builds upon this narrative by analysing the findings from the three studies, exploring how project managers engage with formalized project methodologies, exercise discretion, and negotiate authority in public sector environments. It examines the themes of pragmatic comportment, managerial discretion, and the constructed nature of projectification, framed through the philosophies of Derrida, Heidegger, and Arendt. In particular, this chapter expands upon the definition of projectification introduced in Chapter 5:

“Projectification is the strategic structuring of operational conditions that empower project managers to exercise their professional judgment and make informed decisions effectively.”

The “strategic structuring of operational conditions” is the most crucial aspect of this definition. Public sector organizations are often perceived as rigid and conservative, with some flexibility introduced through past NPM reforms. However, this research demonstrates that public sector organizations and their executive bodies engage in dynamic decision-making while maintaining bureaucratic structures. Bureaucracy is frequently described as an

iron cage (Weber 1978), but what activities are actually occurring within this cage? The operational conditions within bureaucracy are far more adaptable than traditionally assumed, enabling project managers to work within structured constraints while navigating and reconfiguring authority to facilitate project success.

Chapters 4 and 5, along with Alex Morgan's story, illustrate an operational environment that challenges conventional understandings of bureaucracy. These insights are critical in refining what projectification means within the public sector, positioning it not as a static process but as an active and evolving structuring of conditions that enable both control and discretion.

7.2 REVISITING KEY THEMES FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This section revisits the main themes identified in the Literature Review, integrating them with the findings from the studies.

7.2.1 Projectification and Public Sector Challenges

The literature review identified projectification as a defining feature of contemporary public administration, bringing both opportunities and constraints (Hodgson et al. 2019; Fred & Godenhjelm 2023). The findings confirm that projectification imposes new procedural demands while also creating spaces for adaptive managerial discretion (McGrath & Whitty 2020b; Jałocha 2024). The ability to create and manoeuvre within these spaces is critical to strategically structuring operational conditions within public organizations. While projects and project management are instrumental in addressing social challenges faced by public sector organizations, they are neither neutral nor uniformly applied (Fred 2018; Jacobsson & Jałocha 2021). This section explores how public sector organizations have adapted project management methodologies over time, evolving their practices in response to unforeseen challenges and institutional constraints.

The literature on the evolution of projectification contrasts sharply with early studies by Midler (1995) and the NPM-driven reforms of the mid-1990s, which introduced project management standards and processes into Australian Government agencies (Armstrong 1998; Steane 2008). The trajectory of projectification has not followed a linear path (Fred 2018). What project management was initially intended for, how it has been institutionalized, and how it is actually applied today are vastly different. Public sector organizations have adapted and reshaped project management methodologies in unique and context-specific ways (Mukhtar-Landgren 2021; Godenhjelm & Fred 2023). Like Alex Morgan, public sector

project managers have developed their own techniques for navigating projectification, crafting fulfilling careers that have fundamentally transformed the nature of public service (Jensen 2023).

Public sector organizations have gained value in two significant ways during this evolutionary process (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015). First, projectification has enabled the public sector to deliver projects in increasingly complex political and social environments (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015). Second, project managers themselves have developed a distinctive set of skills that extend beyond traditional project management norms (Fred 2020; Jałocha 2024). Despite projects rarely unfolding exactly as planned, there is a remarkable degree of alignment between executives, stakeholders, and project managers (Sjöblom, Löfgren & Godenhjelm 2013). The methods employed by these professionals, however, are not reflected in formal project management standards (Hodgson et al. 2019). In the case of Alex Morgan, for example, she does not strictly adhere to project management processes to achieve project delivery—and she is not expected to. Instead, she strategically bends rules, abandons rigid procedures when necessary, and embraces the challenge of tackling the impossible.

For the public sector organization that employs Alex, the value lies in having a politically savvy and highly competent public servant who can autonomously anticipate political interplay, manage risks intuitively, and execute projects without the bureaucratic delays of formal approval processes. The case of Alex Morgan demonstrates how executives place trust in their project managers to operate with a high degree of autonomy. Her ability to secure stakeholder buy-in, finalize project costing, and make critical decisions in real-time, often through informal channels such as text messages and impromptu meetings, illustrates how public sector project managers thrive when given the authority and discretion to act decisively.

This research highlights that public sector organizations have evolved project management methodologies to fit the realities of the political environment, rather than strictly adhering to commercialized project management standards designed for the private sector. The constraints of public sector governance have led executives to strategically structure operational conditions that enable project managers to deliver outcomes under immense political and administrative pressures. With an increasing number of projects being funnelled through public agencies and a limited number of skilled project managers, executives have

responded by temporarily suspending bureaucratic norms. While bureaucratic command structures remain integral to public administration (Jałocha 2024), executives strategically grant authority, power, and autonomy to project managers when circumstances demand it.

This research reveals that public sector executives hold underestimated power within organizational hierarchies. Their ability to shift structures and priorities in response to political demands, urgent ministerial requests, policy targets, crises such as pandemics, and sudden surges in project funding demonstrates that bureaucratic rigidity is selectively applied. Executives reassert hierarchical command when necessary but also create discretionary spaces for project managers to manoeuvre within. This dynamic highlights the reality that public sector project managers are not simply implementers of formalized methodologies but are strategic actors operating within an evolving system of negotiated autonomy.

The story of Alex Morgan encapsulates the realities of contemporary public sector project management, offering insight into the operational conditions that define projectification. Following the NPM reforms of the mid-1990s (Armstrong 1998; Johnston 2000), Australian public sector executives quickly recognized that enforcing full compliance with project management standards was neither feasible nor beneficial. Instead, they selectively applied methodologies, allowing project managers the discretion to determine when to adhere to formal processes and when to bypass them. If executives had prioritized full methodological compliance, they would have mandated formal measurement tools such as Project Management Offices. Yet, as this research indicates, such offices are virtually absent from public sector organizations. Instead, executives deconstructed project management methodologies to extract only the elements necessary for achieving desired outcomes.

This research concludes that project managers in the public sector operate in a hybrid environment, where they simultaneously comply with and reinterpret methodologies. Projectification should not be seen as a linear progression toward efficiency but as an evolving, negotiated reality actively shaped by executive leadership and bureaucratic command structures. Public sector executives recognize that their trusted project managers must have the authority to move past rigid bureaucratic constraints and navigate uncertainty. By structuring operational conditions that allow project managers to engage with challenges dynamically, executives enable them to move through moments of aporia and emerge with practical solutions that advance public sector goals.

7.2.2 New Public Management (NPM), New Public Governance (NPG), and Projectification

The literature review positions NPM and NPG as intertwined with projectification, emphasizing efficiency, accountability, and networked governance. The research shows that while these frameworks promote structured oversight, they also generate tensions between standardization and flexibility. However, these past reforms have shaped the operational conditions in which public sector managers and project managers operate today. This section describes the collective operating impact and legacies of NPM and NPG on projectification in the public sector. NPM and NPG reforms have occurred at different times and embody different approaches to public service provision (Osborne 2006, p. 9). This research clarifies which aspects of NPM and NPG remain in the operating environment of public sector organizations and how they have affected projectification, public managers, and project managers.

Project management standards and processes have provided public sector organizations and managers the ability to create temporary organizations outside of the bureaucracy while complementing bureaucratic structures (Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). NPM reforms were a key catalyst for the introduction of project management methodologies, which suited public organizations and public managers (Kassel 2016; Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). The structural integrity of public organizations was reinforced by overlaying project management processes and standards, allowing temporary teams to be appended to existing organizational structures (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017, p. 8). From a resourcing perspective, public managers no longer had to assign staff to innovation activities (now known as projects) while ensuring that employees fulfilled their core duties (Blixt & Kirytopoulos 2017). Budgetary funding submissions enabled the creation of dedicated project management positions (Steane 2008). Before project management was recognized as a profession, public organizations relied on other forms of temporary organizing, such as committees and task forces, which lacked international standards or formal processes (Steane 2008; Poulsen & Löfgren 2013). These structures often recommended innovation but did not directly facilitate it (Patton, McKegg & Wehipeihana 2015; Osborne 2018). Project management, in contrast, provided clarity in scope, budget, and quality, making it a natural fit with bureaucracy (Picciotto 2020).

This research highlights the unique interplay between NPM, bureaucracy, and projectification. The implementation of project management standards did not replace bureaucracy but rather overlaid it, creating a dual structure that facilitated innovation, change, policy implementation, task force recommendations, and audit responses (Armstrong 1998; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017). Project management functions as the "doing" arm for public sector change, particularly in the implementation of election commitments (Poulsen & Löfgren 2013). NPM reforms introduced project management to the public sector as a means of ensuring financial control while providing flexibility for innovation (Young et al. 2012; Young & Grant 2015). However, financial control was the primary driver of these reforms, with project time and quality considered secondary concerns—though they became critical for grant submissions (Armstrong 1998; Johnston 2000; Steane 2008).

A key insight from this research is that bureaucracy remains a powerful enabler of discretionary practice within public organizations. Executives, positioned at the top of the hierarchy, oversee political conditions and bureaucratic functions while delegating authority to project managers. This discretionary power is transferred based on the project manager's ability to circumvent and manipulate processes to accelerate project timelines. The case of Alex Morgan illustrates how quickly authority can be assigned—a simple text message from an executive provided her with the power to make significant decisions in real-time. These transactions of authority often occur through informal channels such as hallway conversations, short phone calls, off-the-record meetings, or direct executive messages.

The structuring of project management teams fosters close relationships between executives and project managers, sometimes to the point where directives are communicated via text messages. This research indicates that trust between executives and project managers develops over time, often across multiple projects. Junior project managers are not granted the same level of autonomy early in their careers; they must first gain expertise in project management processes before they can operate with the level of discretion seen in cases like Alex Morgan's. The study was conducted with experienced public sector project managers whose careers have spanned multiple waves of NPM, bureaucracy, and projectification. The relationship between these frameworks is rooted in structured legitimacy, enabling executives to transfer power through project organizations when formal project management processes prove ineffective. The coexistence of project management, bureaucratic structures, and

temporary organizations for project execution reflects the legacy of NPM reforms. However, these structures also allow executives to flexibly adapt operations to external conditions.

NPG was introduced to promote horizontal collaboration and co-creation among multiple stakeholders in the delivery of public services (Hill & Hupe 2021). Unlike NPM, which emphasizes markets and outputs, NPG focuses on trust-based relationships, relational contracts, and outcomes (Krogh & Triantafillou 2024). This approach interacts with projectification by promoting a more open and networked governance model (Ansell & Torfing 2021). However, the output-driven nature of project management aligns more closely with NPM (Young et al. 2012), than with NPG. This tension is evident in cases such as Alex Morgan's stakeholder meetings, where she must simultaneously collaborate and deliver measurable outputs. Public sector organizations have retained legacy processes and business models from NPM while introducing new governance approaches from NPG. While these approaches may appear contradictory, this research suggests they function as complementary tools that enable flexibility within public administration.

Currently, the research indicates that project schedule and timing are the primary concerns for executives, politicians, and policymakers, reflecting the enduring influence of NPM's focus on output metrics. Unlike the financial controls emphasized in the 1990s (Armstrong 1998; Steane 2008), project cost constraints are now less significant. Public sector project managers are frequently provided with open-ended budgets to ensure project quality, reinforcing the shift from financial scrutiny to delivery speed. This aligns with NPG reforms, which prioritize social outcomes over rigid financial control (Casady et al. 2020). Executives, politicians, and policymakers recognize that while the long-term impact of policy-driven projects may take years to manifest, their timely completion is crucial (Edkins & Smyth 2006). Political cycles and government terms further emphasize the importance of project delivery speed (Boyne 2002). This research suggests that the ability to transfer power via bureaucratic structures enables project managers to act quickly and align with political imperatives.

This research illustrates that while bureaucracy, NPM, projectification, and NPG emerged at different times in public sector organizations, they continue to coexist and interact in complex ways. Public managers and project managers operate within a bricolage of processes, policies, and reforms that can be selectively activated depending on political conditions. Bureaucratic structures allow executives to transfer authority and autonomy to project

managers, enabling them to achieve rapid results. This hybridized governance model is both cunning and adaptive, blending past reforms with contemporary practice.

Executives play a crucial role in structuring project environments, often granting project managers temporary authority akin to that of an executive. By shifting aside procedural barriers and hierarchical constraints, they empower project managers to deliver results swiftly. The research shows that the financial control objectives of the 1990s NPM reforms have become secondary to project schedule and timing, which are now the most critical outputs. Project managers are expected to spend allocated budgets within financial years to secure future funding, reinforcing the prioritization of timely execution over strict cost management. This flexibility allows public sector organizations to align with evolving governance models while maintaining the necessary bureaucratic infrastructure to support long-term strategic goals.

In conclusion, this research identifies bureaucracy as an enduring force that continues to shape public sector project management. Rather than rendering past reforms obsolete, public-sector organizations incorporate and adapt them as needed. This research highlights that projectification does not replace bureaucracy but overlays it, creating a dual system that balances structured accountability with discretionary practice. The implication is that public sector governance requires a more nuanced approach, recognizing that project managers operate within a dynamic landscape of procedural rigidity and strategic adaptation.

7.2.3 The Three Levels of Public Sector Projectification

The research reinforces the multi-level nature of projectification:

Societal Level:

At the societal level, public policy directly influences projectification, requiring managers to mediate competing priorities to meet policy targets, often linked to large budgets and high expectations for outcomes (Schoper 2018; Hodgson et al. 2019). This research indicates that the Australian public service prioritizes delivery speed and expenditure over financial control. Central policy makers appear to allocate investment to agencies that can spend efficiently and at scale, creating competition among bureaucrats to exceed policy targets. Policy makers provide abundant funding to expedite social outcomes, leading executives to collaborate with their most capable project managers to ensure delivery. Policies themselves function as structures, with targets often only achievable through projects. Flexible policies facilitate

project creation, enabling significant funding allocations but imposing ambitious targets and deadlines aligned with NPM principles. Consequently, projectification at the societal level can be likened to a high-stakes auction, where agencies bid not with money but with their ability to deliver results at speed. Policy makers, much like auctioneers, favour those who can commit to rapid execution, pushing public sector organizations into a competitive cycle of project initiation and completion. In alignment with NPG, policy makers emphasize outcomes over procedural rigor, pushing agencies to handle numerous projects with tight completion deadlines, often linked to financial years and election cycles.

Organizational Level:

Projectification at the organizational level can be likened to parkour. Institutions maintain elastic bureaucratic frameworks (Fred & Hall 2017), adjusting rules to meet contextual demands. Like practitioners of parkour, public organizations must navigate obstacles in a fast-moving environment, responding dynamically to the scale, pace, and complexity of political conditions. Bureaucratic processes remain in place, but executives provide the necessary clearances and workarounds to allow project managers to move efficiently. In environments of heightened projectification, executives delegate authority and autonomy, ensuring alignment with political imperatives. Rather than eliminating bureaucracy, additional layers are introduced through successive NPM and NPG reforms, requiring project managers to creatively manoeuvre around, through, and over them. The pace of projectification aligns with political and policy conditions, underscoring the continued relevance of hierarchical command structures. Executives play a pivotal role in enabling project delivery by strategically removing bureaucratic barriers. Once the path is cleared, project managers assume full responsibility for execution, much like a parkour practitioner who must quickly adjust their course while maintaining momentum.

Personal Level:

The personal level of projectification can be conceptualized as white-water rafting. As illustrated in Alex Morgan's experience, project managers must navigate an unpredictable environment where conditions can shift rapidly. Within the dynamic public sector project environment, project managers balance competing priorities and respond to stakeholder influences (Virtová & Vostal 2021), much like rafters steering through varying currents. Once executives clear the path, project managers are temporarily freed from bureaucratic

constraints but remain bound by executive command. The unpredictable nature of project execution means that managers must constantly adjust their approach, anticipating challenges and leveraging experience to avoid capsizing. Stakeholders exert pressure, sometimes increasing the pace and sometimes slowing progress, requiring managers to react fluidly. The rafting journey continues until project completion, marked by periods of turbulence, near-failures, recoveries, and eventual success. Practical comportment enables project managers to keep projects afloat, adjusting their navigation strategy based on shifting political and policy demands. Alex Morgan exemplifies this approach, relying not solely on processes but on the authority granted by bureaucracy, executive trust, and personal motivation. This research demonstrates that project managers in the public sector are driven by intrinsic values linked to public service. Their ability to operate in a highly projectified environment hinges on time-sensitive decision-making, a pace that standardized project management methodologies cannot fully accommodate. To facilitate delivery, executives strategically eliminate obstacles, granting project managers the autonomy to meet policy objectives and create public value.

Public sector organizations exert a profound influence across all three levels of projectification. Politics moves at a pace that standardized processes cannot match, and ambitious policy goals drive projectification at the societal level, cascading down to the organizational and personal levels. In response, traditional bureaucratic structures remain a significant force. Executives leverage their authority to create operational space for project managers, assigning power where necessary. Given these complexities, projectification within the public sector requires a distinct conceptualization.

This research proposes the term New Public Projectification (NPP), defined as:

Projectification of the public sector is the leveraging of past and present processes that are overlaid to clear space for project managers to exercise relational power and authority, enabling the maximum number of projects to be delivered to generate public value and outcomes.

Projectification should be understood as a dynamic, relational process rather than a rigid, top-down imposition.

7.2.4 Standardized Project Management Methodologies and Public Sector Complexities

The literature review critiques the rigidity of standardized methodologies (e.g., PRINCE2, PMBOK) in complex public sector environments (Morris et al. 2006; Smyth & Morris 2007). The research confirms that managers do not passively apply methodologies—they strategically engage with them. Additionally, other tools and forms of authority are accessed and utilized to deliver projects beyond formal project processes. Project managers leverage power, discretion, and autonomy either through an executive command via the bureaucratic hierarchy or through policy mandates that contain large budgets and ambitious timelines, as previously discussed. Public sector organizations do not resemble the generic project organizations outlined in project management standards. Instead, they selectively access methodologies when necessary, treating them as one of many tools available for project delivery. However, project management methodologies integrate well with the organizational landscape of public sector institutions because they do not inherently conflict with public sector operations or policy frameworks (Fred 2018). To address public sector complexities, these methodologies are enforced for junior project manager development while, conversely, experienced project managers like Alex Morgan are allowed to practically comport or defer them.

As discussed, public sector organizations ensure that junior project managers develop a detailed understanding of these processes early in their careers. Project standards serve as a foundational learning framework (Godenhjelm, Lundin & Sjöblom 2015; Jensen, Johansson & Löfström 2018) for aspiring public sector project managers, providing a baseline against which they can later comport their actions when faced with complex political projects. This research suggests that to depart from, defer, or comport project management processes effectively, one must first have expert knowledge of them. There appears to be a distinct point at which executives recognize and trust that junior project managers are ready to take on complex assignments, ultimately evolving into project managers like Alex Morgan. Furthermore, this demonstrates that executives respect project management standards. Every executive would value having an experienced team of project managers capable of navigating the complexities of the public sector with the same strategic acumen as Alex Morgan.

The research indicates that standardized project management processes exist as distinct entities within public organizations (Lundin & Söderholm 1995; Grabher 2002). Policies, reforms, bureaucracy, and election commitments underpin much of what project standards

are designed to facilitate (Fred 2018). Policies and reforms inherently contain structured plans, resourcing strategies, risk assessments, targets, timelines, budgets, deliverables, sequencing, and stakeholder management (Ettelt & Mays 2019). This research argues that the shared language of project management is significant, as common project management terminologies have been embedded within policies, reforms, and election commitments. These terms carry legitimacy and conviction for politicians and policy makers, succinctly defining temporality while also allowing public agencies the flexibility to create and implement projects as they see fit. This aligns with the previous findings on the bricolage of historic and contemporary practices that shape public sector project management. Executives and experienced project managers leverage power from the central bureaucracy and operate with the Pragmatic Comportment Compass, while junior project managers manage projects utilizing standardized methodologies for assignments with lower levels of political or policy demand. This strategic bricolage provides executives with a range of options, allowing for rapid adaptation, access to diverse skill sets, and efficient project delivery.

Therefore, the research identifies that the vast array of processes generated through successive reforms are never fully abandoned, even if they appear as additional layers of bureaucratic red tape. Rather, they are selectively deferred or comported depending on the practical deconstruction of each situation.

The Pragmatic Comportment Compass illustrates how managers engage with formal processes—choosing to use, manipulate, circumvent, or endure them as necessary. Public sector project management requires balancing structure and discretion, acknowledging that strict adherence to methodologies can sometimes hinder adaptability. By leveraging both standardized frameworks and discretionary authority, public sector project managers navigate the complexities of policy, bureaucracy, and political demands to achieve successful project outcomes.

7.2.5 Authority, Autonomy, and Emerging Frameworks

The literature emphasizes the tension between bureaucratic control and managerial autonomy (Ansell & Gash 2008; Lægreid & Rykkja 2015; Ansell & Torfing 2021). The research reveals that authority in projectification is not static but emergent, shaped through decision-making, stakeholder negotiations, and institutional constraints. As discussed, the bricolage of processes introduced by NPM and NPG reforms in public sector organizations creates an

environment that may appear heavily red-taped to an external observer. Bureaucracy continues to layer additional processes, overlaying existing ones rather than replacing them.

This research finds that executives engage in real-time governance, exercised through pragmatic adjustments and by leveraging experienced project managers as facilitators of action. This governance occurs through direct executive command, which rapidly disseminates across the organization.

Business units quickly recognize when a project manager has been deployed by the executive, demonstrating a unique organizational dynamic. Notably, executives follow a well-established bureaucratic process in doing so. The hierarchical chain of command in bureaucracy operates in a distinct way for project, although project managers may be positioned four levels below an executive in the management structure, the executive can bypass these layers, establishing a direct relationship with the project manager. This enables swift decision-making and assigns the necessary authority for immediate action. This manoeuvring is conducted entirely within the established rules and protocols of bureaucracy, demonstrating its adaptability rather than rigidity. Executives pragmatically leverage organizational structures to deconstruct complex political situations that could otherwise threaten bureaucratic stability. This approach is necessary, as following the conventional chain of command—where decisions pass through multiple hierarchical layers—would introduce delays incompatible with the urgency of policy-driven projects.

Policy makers and politicians expect rapid results (Jałocha 2024), placing pressure on executives to balance bureaucratic integrity with the demands of policy implementation and election commitments—many of which are project-based. Projects present one-off scenarios that exist outside routine work and require fast, decisive action (Jałocha 2024). Therefore, this research suggests that executives operate with an implicit mindset that “what happens in the project, stays in the project.” Unlike routine operational work, which is bound by strict procedural conformity, project-based work provides an environment where deviations and pragmatic adjustments are more permissible. Authority is exercised through real-time governance, with managers continuously negotiating their role within the evolving bureaucratic landscape.

Project managing should thus be understood as an ongoing negotiation of authority rather than a fixed, hierarchical structure. This research highlights the fluid and adaptable nature of authority in public sector projectification, where bureaucratic command structures are not dismantled but strategically flexed to enable project success.

7.3 NAVIGATING PROJECTIFICATION: AUTHORITY, AUTONOMY, AND THE SPACE BETWEEN

This section discusses how Chapters 4, 5 and 6 interrelate and the contributions that each study has delivered to the literature for public administration and project management which has resulted in original findings for both disciplines. We deliver in this section findings that are harmonised from the three studies holistically which influence all levels of projectification.

7.3.1 Study 1 (Chapter 4): Creating Authority and Autonomy

The first study reveals the tensions between institutional authority and managerial autonomy in projectification. Public sector project managers do not merely apply methodologies—they interpret, negotiate, and adapt them to fit complex, real-world conditions. This aligns with Arendt’s concept of action, where authority is not simply imposed but continuously redefined through engagement with governance structures and stakeholder relationships.

This study examines what public sector project managers do when confronted with the impossible, as they continually find ways to enable project delivery within their projectified reality. Nothing ever goes smoothly, and these challenges occur constantly. Project managers negotiate the past and present to deliver a future result while suspending and deferring project managing processes when necessary. In doing so, they create space to develop meaning that can be applied to a future that has yet to materialize.

The evolution of public sector projectification indicates that processes and political conditions shift over time. As this research highlights, project managing processes were initially introduced into the Australian public sector to micromanage budgets and establish financial control. Currently, this is no longer the primary focus. Policy makers demand expedited project delivery, and politicians require election promises to be fulfilled within election cycles. This creates an immediate tension, as political deliverables are often incompatible with conventional project managing practices. To meet these deliverables, public sector project managers are granted authority and autonomy to suspend and defer processes, allowing them to negotiate and practically deconstruct their next move. Executives

facilitate this space. Notably, the 1990s marks the beginning of this projectified life for many senior project managers.

The Derridean lenses of Différance and Deconstruction in Study 1 describe the projectified life that public sector project managers inhabit. They possess an elevated, almost panoramic perspective on public sector project managing and public management, allowing them to view situations at a broader and more holistic level. This elevated awareness provides them with a wide vision of the public sector landscape, particularly at the organizational and societal levels of projectification. It is evident that they feel responsible for what occurs at these levels, which is why they are granted significant freedom and space in the form of authority and autonomy through executive support. Their intrinsic motivation and values drive their actions, reflecting their deep commitment to their public department and to the broader societal good. Moreover, their responsibility at the organizational and societal levels is further demonstrated by the increasing volume of projects assigned by policy makers and politicians, despite the limited number of project managers available. Yet, public sector project managers continue to find ways to deliver projects, regardless of these increasing demands. This commitment underscores their care for both society and public organizations and illustrates how they apply Différance and Deconstruction as the foundation for their daily actions.

The application of Différance and Deconstruction reveals that public sector project managers operate with a philosophy centred on delivering public good. Their actions can be described as moments where the world around them pauses while they weigh up binary oppositions, deconstructing what surrounds them while transferring thoughts between past, present, and future to justify public good, novelty, and challenge. These philosophical frameworks highlight that public sector project managers base their actions and decisions at a high conceptual level, rather than operating solely at the tactical level prescribed by project managing processes. For example, ensuring a new roof is completed on a kindergarten in time for the start of Term 1 is more important than delivering the project under budget. Similarly, prioritizing the completion of a homeless shelter before winter takes precedence over strictly enforcing contract management deadlines for a builder. Executives trust this particular type of public sector project manager because, at the personal level of projectification, they act with authority and autonomy while considering the broader organizational and societal levels.

The public sector project managers in this study are seasoned professionals who have experienced an array of political agendas, multiple political parties in government, numerous executives, reforms, strategies, and public sector challenges. Study 1 confirms that these experiences shape their present approach, allowing them to practically deconstruct situations to initiate action. They have embraced this projectified life as a means to create social good. The organizational landscape of a public sector project manager is vast, particularly when they feel responsible for projectification across all three levels—societal, organizational, and personal. They continuously negotiate binary oppositions against the norms of project managing standards and bureaucracy to deliver public good and public value.

7.3.2 Study 2 (Chapter 5): The Pragmatic Comportment Compass

The second study conceptualizes the Pragmatic Comportment Compass, which categorizes the ways project managers engage with methodologies:

- To Use – When methodologies align with project goals and provide structured support
- To Manipulate – When methodologies are selectively adapted to fit contextual realities
- To Circumvent – When managers bypass rigid protocols to enable progress
- To Suffer – When managers are constrained by bureaucratic structures and endure the limitations.

Study 2 examines what public sector project managers do to deliver projects within their projectified reality. Once project managers operate within the space created by the executive, they utilize their Pragmatic Comportment Compass to navigate the public sector landscape and achieve project delivery. As discussed in Chapter 6, there exists a bricolage of policies, processes, and power structures that public sector project managers can leverage. Study 2 identifies the real-time actions they employ to facilitate project delivery. While Study 1 identifies their mindset, one driven by values and a sense of responsibility at the organizational and societal levels of projectification, Study 2 explores the tangible actions that stem from this mindset. Once the path is cleared by the executive to enable space for the project manager to deliver, they are deployed into the bureaucracy.

It is not all smooth sailing once the space is created by the executive to lower project processes and transfer authority and autonomy to the public sector project manager. Once they have acquired, space, autonomy and authority they need to be able to navigate public sector conditions and projectification of the organisation and society as it surrounds them. Steering a project to success is a challenge and obstacles associated with election commitments, policy targets, external stakeholders with influence and funding milestones are just some of the conditions that impact public sector project managers. Despite executives clearing a pathway, these conditions exist and influence the way projects are delivered. It is important to note that the bureaucracy does not protect the public sector project manager. The public sector project manager in a way is the one protecting the bureaucracy as they comport their way through the public sector system as projects are politically interesting.

Study 2 describes what public sector project managers do to deliver projects in their projectified life and articulates the projectified atmosphere which they operate within. Chapter 7 articulates project action as being like white water rafting at the personal level of projectification. Action is inconsistent or uneven in public sector environments which is where project management processes become obsolete. External conditions and requirements of political stakeholders attribute to this inconsistency, where public sector project managers have to make sharp turns to steer projects in a straight direction. As specified previously, public sector projects are never smooth sailing, but public sector project managers seem to always navigate them to calmer waters. Yet public sector social actors involved in project work utilise the pragmatic comportment compass to safely steer public projects towards project delivery. The compass aids the public sector project manager in being able to counter the actions of other social actors in the project environment whilst also maintaining a relationship with them. This is consistent with our definition of projectification, in that its foundation is based on relationships to enable a forward-like movement in this performative despite an inconsistent tempo or pace. It is albeit rather temporary as the public sector project manager can see the bigger picture of project delivery in that what they are doing with the compass creates public value.

Suffering another person's actions provisions is a fast and forward like movement. The public sector project manager can decide to suffer at a split second if it is going to attribute to the bigger picture of a project. Using a project process for the sake of legitimising the bureaucracy may be seen as a slow movement forward, however if it attributes to a faster

pace elsewhere in the project lifecycle, the public sector project manager has already practically deconstructed the performative in this manner. Slowing things down can make project activities faster elsewhere in the future. Manipulating a process is a medium paced version of process utilisation where it demonstrates a form of legitimisation and circumventing a process is the quickest move of all. The compass clearly counteracts external action and where each element of the compass provides the public sector project manager with a move that can slow or speed up the project lifecycle.

Study 2 provides insight into the fact that public sector organisations are strategically time-based organisations. There appears to be a currency and value placed on time, opposed to project cost or quality. The compass assists in the navigation of time as public sector project managers practically deconstruct what is around them to fast-forward project delivery. Public sector social actors in project environments shape time in a way that they can impose time pressures on public sector project managers for faster delivery and sometimes they can inhibit time through adding additional scope. The comportment compass displays the public sector project managers effort in knowing the right manoeuvre to pull to deliver on time in spite of these situations imposed on them by others. This projectified atmosphere is counteracted by the balance in which the comportment compass provides public sector project managers and projects get delivered. It is abstract but it clearly does two things. Firstly, projects get delivered prior to election cycles, policy milestone targets and financial deadlines. Secondly, the bureaucracy is protected whilst this all occurs which does correlate with findings in Chapter 7. Study 2 identifies that the bureaucracy is susceptible to the time taken to deliver outcomes based on its physical configuration (structure and processes). There is an abundance of literature that suggests this heavily red-taped environment slows things down. Really, the modern-day bureaucracy is much more functional than this when it comes to project delivery. The practical comportment compass holds the bureaucracy together in being able to shift momentum, whilst delivering projects that align with politics and social needs.

7.3.3 Study 3 (Chapter 6): Rethinking Projectification

This chapter critically examines projectification through a Derridean lens, arguing that standardized methodologies function as texts open to deconstruction. Instead of viewing PRINCE2 and PMBOK as rigid frameworks, project managers engage with them as interpretive artifacts, selectively applying, modifying, or rejecting their prescriptions based on situational needs. This study highlights that public sector project managers do not operate

within a fixed procedural system but rather within a landscape that requires constant negotiation between formal methodologies and the complexities of governance, policy, and political imperatives.

Chapter 6 identifies that public sector project managers are projectifying themselves onto this world via the projectified life they live. They go beyond the discipline and processes of project management to deliver public value as they feel ethically and socially responsible for doing so. They embrace the impossible and show desire to create something new that didn't exist before. Throughout Chapter 7.2 there is a clear theme that there is a forward progressive movement which public sector project managers and public sector organisations initiate in tandem to deliver public value, just like our reference to parkour and white water rafting resembling projectification at the personal and organisational levels.

Arendt's theory of natal willingness describes the public sector project managers burning desire and resilience to confront complexity, ambiguity and challenge repeatedly. Their willingness and combined with the freedom that is granted by their executives is complementary. Projects represent new things. Project managing the construction of a stadium or a hospital that address social needs for future generations are once in a lifetime projects. Natal willingness and political action according to Arendt are facilitated by one's desire to bring something new into the world that did not exist before. It is clear in Chapter 6 and discussion (Chapter 7) that values and motivation drive public sector project managers as their craft is very different from what the project management discipline and processes describe. This opposition would be uncomfortable for some social actors that are career project managers which makes public sector project managers unique in their own right. The participants of this study all share these commonalities in competencies and individual qualities.

Derrida's concept of Différance describes how constraints are in fact enablers. Similar to what was discussed in Chapter 7.2, high levels of control within managerialism results in social actors building up a form of bravery to challenge and break rules. This constraint in reality becomes an enabler. The challenges of public sector management are complex and the concepts of Différance, ethical responsibility, natality, codifiable and ineffable truths all lead to practical deconstruction. Collectively they describe how public sector project managers impose themselves on the world and respond in this projectified life they live in. Chapter 7.2 articulates that there is much more to public sector projects than meets the eye, especially in a

sense that project management is dominated by public sector policy, reforms (NPM and NPG) and bureaucracy. I posit that projectification and project management are two separate disciplines. Projectification has left project management in its wake. This demonstrates several response mechanisms and personality traits that public sector project managers have that are far beyond the project management discipline when in reality it's in response to projectification at personal, organisational and societal levels.

Study 3 reinforces the findings of the previous studies, illustrating that project managing in the public sector is an adaptive, meaning-making process. Public sector project managers exercise pragmatic discretion, using methodologies as guides rather than rigid prescriptions. This aligns with Study 1, where project managers demonstrate an acute awareness of their responsibility at the organizational and societal levels, and Study 2, which outlines their real-time actions in project delivery. Together, these studies emphasize that project managing is neither a mechanical execution of predefined steps nor a deviation from formal governance but rather a deliberate act of balancing structure with flexibility.

7.4 CONCLUSION: THE ART OF HOLDING CONTRADICTIONS

Alex Morgan's day encapsulates the realities of project managing: conflicting demands, shifting power dynamics, and the necessity of creative discretion. The studies collectively demonstrate that project managing is an act of continuous negotiation, where authority is fluid, methodologies are malleable, and discretion is not an anomaly but a necessity.

Thus, the role of the public sector project manager is not simply to execute methodologies but to navigate, shape, and redefine them in response to the complexities of governance, politics, and human relationships. Rather than being constrained by methodologies, public sector project managers inhabit a space where they strategically interpret, manipulate, and adapt project frameworks to ensure successful outcomes.

Projectification in the public sector should therefore be understood not as a static process of applying methodologies but as an evolving, iterative practice that blends structure with adaptability, formal authority with discretion, and policy-driven objectives with practical realities. The ability to hold these contradictions, to simultaneously adhere to governance structures while pragmatically reconfiguring them, is the defining skill of the public sector project manager. This study ultimately reframes project managing as an active, relational, and

political practice, where success depends not solely on technical execution but on the capacity to engage, negotiate, and adapt in response to an ever-changing landscape.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis has examined how public sector project managers interact with reference documents, revealing a nuanced relationship between formalized project management methodologies and real-world project work. Through an interpretive analysis and a Derridean lens, the research has demonstrated that reference documents do not simply dictate project managing practices but serve as a flexible foundation that project managers negotiate, adapt, or circumvent as needed. This concluding chapter synthesizes the key findings, highlights contributions to theory and practice, acknowledges limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

8.2 REVISITING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis sought to answer three key research questions:

1. **What specific conditions in public organizations challenge the applicability of standard project management reference documents?**
 - The research identified several recurring conditions that rendered reference documents impractical or insufficient in public sector project work. These included unrealistic stakeholder-imposed expectations, bureaucratic rigidity, competing governance demands, and the need for ethical discretion. These conditions created situations where project managers had to go beyond the formal methodologies outlined in reference documents.
2. **Under these challenging conditions, which elements of these documents are often not enforced or are suspended?**
 - The study found that project managers selectively suspended or modified elements such as risk assessment protocols, reporting structures, and formalized decision-making hierarchies. Instead, they relied on experiential knowledge, professional discretion, and stakeholder negotiation to achieve project goals.

3. Drawing insights from the findings of RQ1 and RQ2, what can be revealed about the relationship between public organization project managers and their reference documents?

- The findings illustrate that reference documents act as a source of both authority and adaptability. Project managers engage with these documents not as rigid mandates but as legitimizing frameworks that enable discretion. By interpreting, modifying, and at times circumventing formal methodologies, project managers use reference documents as a means of both compliance and resistance, ensuring their practical effectiveness within complex public sector environments.

8.3 KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis makes significant contributions to theory, practice, and policy.

8.3.1 Theoretical Contributions

Project Managing as Practical Deconstruction

The research extends Derridean deconstruction into project management, demonstrating how reference documents function as texts open to interpretation rather than prescriptive rulebooks. The interplay between formal documentation and discretionary action is framed as a process of ongoing reinterpretation.

Reconceptualizing Projectification

Traditional views of projectification often emphasize increased managerial control. This research challenges that perspective, arguing that projectification, as experienced in the public sector, enables discretion by providing a framework within which project managers justify and negotiate their decisions.

Différance in Project Managing

The research applies Derrida's concept of *différance* to show how reference documents defer meaning and create spaces for interpretative flexibility. Project managers leverage this inherent ambiguity to navigate governance constraints effectively.

8.3.2 Practical Contributions

Balancing Structure and Adaptability

The findings suggest that public sector organizations should acknowledge and formalize the role of discretion in project management. Training programs and policies should emphasize interpretative skills and adaptive expertise rather than rigid adherence to methodologies.

Rethinking Accountability Frameworks

Public sector governance often relies on standardized project management methodologies for accountability. This research suggests that effective accountability should incorporate the recognition of discretionary actions and the rationale behind deviations from formal protocols.

8.3.3 Policy Implications

Maintaining the Ambiguity of Reference Documents

Rather than refining project management reference documents into rigid compliance tools, policymakers should recognize that their inherent ambiguity is what allows them to be useful in complex public sector environments.

Encouraging Reflexive Project Governance

The study highlights the need for governance structures that acknowledge the situated nature of decision-making in project management. Reflexive governance models that incorporate practitioner narratives can improve the effectiveness of public sector project management.

8.4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this thesis provides novel insights, it has certain limitations:

Contextual Scope

The research is based on data from Australian public sector project managers. Future research could expand to other national or institutional contexts to explore how projectification manifests differently across governance systems.

Empirical Expansion

The research relies on interviews and focus groups. Longitudinal studies or ethnographic approaches could provide deeper insights into how project managers navigate discretion over time.

Exploring Alternative Theoretical Lenses

While this research draws from Derridean and Arendtian perspectives, further research could explore complementary frameworks, such as institutional theory or complexity theory, to enrich our understanding of public sector project work.

8.5 FINAL REFLECTIONS

This thesis has argued that projectification in the public sector does not merely impose structured methodologies but provides project managers with the means to exercise discretion and ethical judgment. Reference documents, rather than enforcing rigid compliance, serve as legitimizing tools that enable professional adaptation. By framing project managing as practical deconstruction, the study highlights the interpretive, situated, and often paradoxical nature of project work.

Ultimately, the findings advocate for a shift in how public sector project management is understood and governed. Rather than viewing projectification as a mechanism of control, it should be recognized as a space that permits professional agency within structured environments. This perspective not only challenges conventional assumptions about project management methodologies but also paves the way for more reflexive, context-sensitive approaches to public sector project governance.

Throughout my research journey and as a project manager in the public sector, I feel privileged to have experienced the project management discipline as a practitioner and a researcher. As a public sector project manager, there is this distinct feeling one gets when making decisions on behalf of society to deliver projects that are once-in-a-lifetime experiences. As a researcher, I feel rewarded to have explained the world around me. There is a great deal of responsibility being a researcher in providing research that articulates reality. I aimed to unveil how public sector organisations operated in this thesis. Public sector organisations are tasked with the impossible and in turn, so are public sector project

managers. How one deals with the impossible, is something truly remarkable and I am glad that this thesis describes the internal tension which enables the conquering of the impossible.

Drawing to a close, I emphasize that I am fortunate to have an outstanding collective of individuals inside of this text that have shaped the study. Individuals include Derrida, Heidegger, Arendt, projectification scholars, research participants, journal reviewers, my supervisors and examiners. These individuals have shown me the power of expressing the inexpressible through writing and collectively constructed a study that I am satisfied with. Their past stories, perspectives, experiences, observations, critiques and performatives have eventuated into a collection of arche-writing that describes the projectified life. I value each and every one of these individuals, both past and present and in my eyes, it is a team effort that produces research, not myself as an individual researcher. I will sign off in the words of Derrida (1978, p. 408), "what cannot be said above all must not be silenced, but written".

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