

Empirical Research Paper

# The Pragmatic Comportment Compass: Rethinking projectification in public sector projects<sup>☆</sup>

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## 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.

## 1. 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 managing in public organizations (Schoper, 2018; Fred and Mukhtar-Landgren, 2019; McGrath and 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

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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 and 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 and 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.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The projectification of public sector organizations

The 'projectification' trend has increasingly influenced public sector organizations (Fred and 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 organizations 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 and Whitty, 2019; Rowe et al., 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 organizations (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, 2020; Jaloča, 2019). In Sweden's public sector, especially in local government dealings with EU project funding, projectification involves specific agents, techniques, and tools (Fred and 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 and Heckscher, 1994). This disruption is often likened to the flexibility in the private sector (Sjöblom et al., 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 and Hall, 2017).

Criticisms of projectification persist. Concerns include potential organizational fragmentation, jeopardizing service coordination and continuity (Edelenbos and Klijn, 2009; Godenhjelm et al., 2015). In Slovenia, projectification has affected job security and professional status, impacting public sector employment stability (Greer et al., 2019). In America and Sweden, the anticipated decentralization benefits have been met with scepticism, challenging its efficiency (Andersson, 2009; Fred and Hall, 2017; Munck Af Rosenschöld and 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 and 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.

### 2.2. 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 and 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 et al., 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, 2021), with a similar number certified in 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 and 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 and Whitty, 2020). The growing criticism of 'projectification' of public organizations stemming from these reference documents is consistent with a broader, long-standing critique found in the project management literature.

### 2.3. 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 and Andersen, 2015). The theoretical bases of these frameworks appear fragmented or absent (Smyth and Morris, 2007; Shepherd and Atkinson, 2011), and their practical applications frequently fail to capture the complexities and uncertainties inherent in project management, particularly in the public sector (Davies and Brady, 2016; Kiridena and 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 et al., 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.

## 2.4. 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 et al., 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 and 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 and Saltman, 2017; Paquet and 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.

## 2.5. 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 and Lorsch, 1967; Pennings, 1975; Drazin and 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 and Souder, 1994; Eisenhardt and Tabrizi, 1995; Balachandra and Friar, 1997; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Souder and 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. 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 and Wald, 2012). Studies by Joslin and Müller (2015) 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.

## 2.6. 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 and 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 and Whitty, 2015, 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 et al. (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. Ripplin (2013) highlights the role of aesthetic and sensory experiences in inquiry, advocating for arts-based methods as fundamental to social progress. Kelemen et al. (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 and Andersen, 2015; Rowe et al., 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.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. 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-min 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 and 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 et al. (2020) a focus group of 4–10 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.

#### 3.2. 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:

1. **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.

2. **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'.
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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.
6. **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.

#### 3.3. 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.

### 4. 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.

#### 4.1. 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.

#### 4.2. To Manipulate

Participants also alluded to their manipulation of project management processes for achieving specific outcomes or navigating hindrance 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 organizations 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’ compartment emphasizes the structured approach to processes, the ‘To Manipulate’ compartment reveals how public sector project managers employ adaptive strategies to navigate challenges and leverage opportunities for achieving desired outcomes.

#### 4.3. 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 other 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.

#### 4.4. 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. 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 and Whitty, 2019; Queensland Audit Office, 2020; Office of the Auditor General Western Australia, 2021). This behavior 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 and 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.

### 5.1. 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 (Fig. 1):

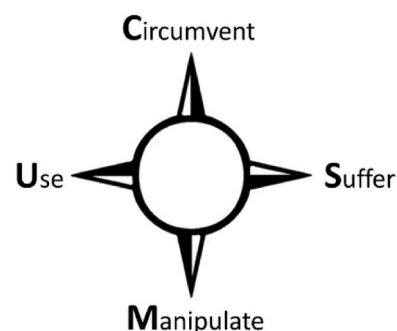


Fig. 1. The pragmatic comportment compass.

- **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.

We suggest that the Pragmatic Compartment 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.

## 5.2. 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 et al., 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 and 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 Compartment 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.

## 5.3. 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 and Whitty, 2019; Fred and 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 Compartment Compass,' with robust support from senior management.

The key differences between current and our alternative are:

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **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.

#### 5.4. *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.

#### 5.5. *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.

#### 5.6. *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.

## 6. 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.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Kevan M. Rowe:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Stephen Jonathan Whitty:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Anita Louise Wheeldon:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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