

Empirical Research Paper

# Creating authority and autonomy: Necessary dialectical tensions in public sector project management

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Projectification  
Public sector  
Derridean theory  
Deconstruction  
Différance

## 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.

## 1. 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 and Klijn, 2009; Hodgson et al., 2019). The shift towards projectification has transformed public organisations 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 and Whitty, 2019; Office of the Auditor General Western Australia, 2021; Queensland Audit Office, 2020). 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 organisations 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 (Hodgson et al., 2019; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Winter et al., 2006) and make projects tangible for managers (Hodgson and Cizmil, 2006a). 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 and Whitty, 2015, 2019).

To investigate the relationship between public sector project managers and reference documents, we use two theoretical approaches. An

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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 1), 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.

## 2. Literature review

The projectification of public sector organisations is a growing area of interest for researchers (Fred, 2019; Godenhjelm et al., 2015; 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, 2019). 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 and Heckscher, 1994). In this section, we synthesize 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).

### 2.1. 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 (State of Victoria, 2019; State of Western Australia, 2019; Tasmanian Government, 2011). These reference documents also commonly underpin government training programs (Australian Federal Government, 2008, 2021; State of New South Wales, 2021; State of Victoria, 2018; State of Western Australia, 2012). 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, Fred (2015, 2019); Jalocho (2019); Lundin (2011)). Some propose that projectification reinforces public sector bureaucracy (Fred, 2020; Mukhtar-Landgren, 2021) while others argue it disrupts bureaucracy (Clegg, 1990; Donnellon and 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 (Hodgson et al., 2019; Sjöblom et al., 2013). 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 and Hall, 2017). Nevertheless, the projectification of public organisations has come under increased scrutiny (Edelenbos and 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 (Jalocho, 2019). There are concerns that projectification may fragment permanent organisations and jeopardise their ability to maintain service coordination and continuity (Godenhjelm et al., 2015). In some countries, such as Slovenia, projectification is reducing job security and diminishing employee professional status (Greer et al., 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 and 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 and 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 et al., 2015), as public sector organisations differ from their private sector counterparts and have issues with a one-size-fits-all project management approach (Godenhjelm et al., 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 et al., 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.

### 2.2. 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 and Söderholm, 1995), and its powerful influence continues today (Blomquist et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2006). There are over 1 million certified Project Management Professionals (PMP) (Project Management Institute, 2021) 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

**Table 1**  
Summary of Derridean lens components and RQ3 findings.

Derridean lens Component	Summary	RQ3 findings	Example Quotes
1. A Structure of the Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The past and future are interconnected within the present.</li> <li>We experience the present as an internalized narrative, influenced by both past actions (retention) and future possibilities (protention).</li> <li>Our selective attention determines what is relevant to us in shaping our experience of the present.</li> <li>The interplay of retention and protention creates tension, compelling us to shape what is retended towards desired future outcomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic necessity requires the deliberate suspension or deviation from a project management system to steer project work towards an envisioned future.</li> <li>This deliberate move “opens a space” for experimentation, imagination, and innovative solutions by temporarily setting aside organizational processes.</li> <li>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.</li> <li>Through this intentional suspension, project managers selectively attend to what is relevant in the present, shaping retended elements towards desired outcomes.</li> </ul>	<p>“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]</p>
2. A Framing of Now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Our perception of Now is framed by a reference point with duration.</li> <li>Our articulation of now includes negation and absencing relationships to a completed, idealized version of itself.</li> <li>Unlike the present, now incorporates a reflective component that helps us orient ourselves towards a reference point or ideal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project managers orient themselves by using project lifecycle terms, consequently positioning recalled ‘now’ moments within a wider temporal framework.</li> <li>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.</li> </ul>	<p>“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]</p>
3. Creation of Binary Opposition and Hierarchies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Binaries such as Scope vs. Constraint, Innovation vs. Stability, Flexibility vs. Control, play a crucial role in influencing our perception and interpretation of reality.</li> <li>Binaries create tensions within us, igniting a desire for resolution, force us to make decisions, and push us towards action.</li> <li>Binaries lead to hierarchies, as one element often assumes superiority over the other.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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.</li> <li>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.</li> </ul>	<p>“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]</p>
4. Negation and Absencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negation and absence are integral to our perception and interpretation of reality.</li> <li>Negation shapes our perception by defining objects through their opposite qualities.</li> <li>Absencing shapes our perception by contrasting objects to related but absent entities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instances of negation and absencing are measured against the ideals outlined in project reference documents, allowing project managers to assess and interpret project situations.</li> <li>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.</li> </ul>	<p>“. 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]</p>
5. Ideals as references	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Despite their inherent flaws and internal contradictions, ideals shape our perception of what is desirable and worthwhile.</li> <li>Ideals serve as motivational forces, driving us to pursue improvement.</li> <li>Ideals stimulate reflection and self-evaluation, encouraging us to assess our progress against them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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.</li> <li>These ideals serve as strong motivators, shaping their understanding of what is desirable and worthwhile.</li> <li>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.</li> </ul>	<p>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]</p>
6. Interconnectedness and Contextuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The present and the now are complex interconnected differences, signs, and signifiers.</li> <li>The dynamic interplay of these elements within various contexts shapes meaning-making.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project managers perceive their current situation within broader contexts, including organizational culture, procurement procedures, risk management practices, and stakeholder engagement strategies.</li> <li>They recognize that comprehending the complexity and dynamics of their situation entails considering the interplay and interaction of different elements, which</li> </ul>	<p>“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]</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Derridean lens Component	Summary	RQ3 findings	Example Quotes
7. Signification and Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our emphasis on the ideal eclipses the process of différance.</li> <li>• This eclipsing hinders our understanding of the true significance and meaning of the present.</li> <li>• Therefore, fixation on the now eclipses our perception of the present.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contributes to the generation of meaning and understanding.</li> <li>• Project managers' reflections and adaptations in response to suspended project management processes highlight the inherent tensions between the ideal and their lived reality.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>	<p>"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]</p>
8. The flux of meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The meaning of the past, present, and future is in constant flux.</li> <li>• Meaning is shaped by new information, changing circumstances, and evolving perspectives.</li> <li>• Absolute meaning always deferred and subject to continual reinterpretation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When project managers reflect on specific circumstances within public organisations that challenge the integrity of organizational project management processes, this prompts them to reevaluate their own perceptions of the situation.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>	<p>"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]</p>
9. Natural Metaphysics or Deconstruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our innate drive to generate new ideas and inventions stems from our quest to understand and navigate reality.</li> <li>• Experts, acting as deconstructionists, possess an intuitive understanding of their work.</li> <li>• They operate in the present, transcending established assumptions, norms, and hierarchies.</li> <li>• Experts continuously construct and shape the future, incorporating the necessary possibilities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project managers adopt a deconstructionist perspective by recognizing that the intricate nature of reality rarely aligns with rigid project management systems.</li> <li>• They embrace their innate understanding of reality and flexibly adapt their approach to navigate complex situations.</li> <li>• By temporarily suspending certain organizational project management systems, they create a space for critical reflection and re-evaluation of underlying assumptions.</li> <li>• Project managers enjoy exploring unconventional approaches and uncovering new possibilities, driven by their inherent desire to solve project problems.</li> </ul>	<p>"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]</p>

fit-for-purpose' concerns regarding the use of these reference documents in public organisation (McGrath and Whitty, 2020b), the sustained criticism of these sacred cows (Muriithi and 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 and Andersen, 2015). And while the theoretical grounding of the reference documents is characterised as fractured at best (Smyth and Morris, 2007) or missing entirely (Shepherd and Atkinson, 2011), their production does not give sufficient attention to the realities of practice (Badewi, 2016; Besner and Hobbs, 2012). 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 (Andersen, 2016; Smith, 2011). Complexity and uncertainty suffer from similar underrepresentation in the reference documents (Davies and Brady, 2016; Kiridena and Sense, 2016; Lenfle and Loch, 2010; Svejvig and Andersen, 2015). Moreover, not only do the reference documents offer conflicting definition of key terms between them, many lack an internal cohesion (McGrath and 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 and Whitty, 2020a). This apparent complication in the literature could be explained by taking a contingency approach to practice (Besner and Hobbs, 2012;

Shenhar, 2001), 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 and 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 organisations 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 organisations, 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 organisations 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.

**3. 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 1, each is summarised in terms relevant to this research.

*3.1. 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 Fig. 1, 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.

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).

*3.2. 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.’

*3.3. 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.

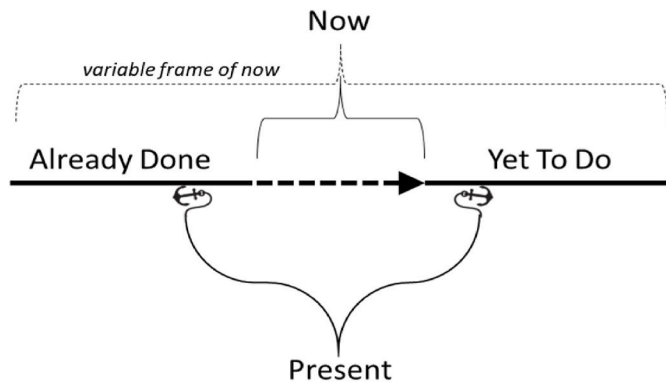
Derrida (1997) suggests that binary structures generate tension, compelling us to seek resolution and propelling us from the perceived past (the already done) towards a subjectively imagined future (the yet to do). This tension influences our actions in the present, as we grapple with what has transpired 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.

*3.4. 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



**Fig. 1.** ‘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.



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.

### 3.5. 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 organisations, 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 and Cicmil, 2006b).

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.

### 3.6. 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 and Whitty,

2017), as they not only influence but also define the project’s essence, with their needs, expectations, and interactions shaping its trajectory.

### 3.7. 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.

### 3.8. 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 3.3.5). 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.

### 3.9. 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 (Caputo, 2018; Cornell et al., 2016). 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 recognize 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 emphasizes the dialectical nature of the temporary suspension of the law. While the judge engages in a moment of suspension, it is essential to recognize 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 (Caputo, 2018; Cornell et al., 2016) and others (Butler, 2010; Lévinas, 1969) contend 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 (Caputo, 2018; Cornell et al., 2016) 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 et al., 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. 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.

### 4.1. 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 (Fletcher, 2017; Hoddy, 2019; Roberts, 2014), all interviewees took part in a 90-min 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.

### 4.2. Data analysis

**Thematic:** For RQ1 and RQ2, we utilize thematic analysis (Braun and 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 1, 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.

## 5. 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.

### 5.1. 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.

#### 5.1.1. 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.

#### 5.1.2. 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 realization 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.

#### 5.1.3. 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.

#### 5.1.4. 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.

#### 5.2. 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.

##### 5.2.1. 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.

##### 5.2.2. 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.

5.2.3. *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.

5.2.4. *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 organisations 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.

5.2.5. *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 prioritizing 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.

5.3. *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 1 summarizes the key components of the Derridean lens and their corresponding findings regarding the relationship between public organization project managers and reference documents. The insights from RQ1 and RQ2, pertinent to RQ3, show that participants often suspend certain project management protocols under conditions typical in the public sector. Interestingly, the protocols frequently suspended could be considered integral to managing these projects. This situation illustrates a nuanced, paradoxical dynamic: while reference documents theoretically guide public sector organizational protocols, practitioners frequently set these guidelines aside. Next, utilizing our Derridean lens, we reveal this complex relationship, where practitioners navigate a balance between theoretical frameworks and pragmatic project demands. Example quotes in the following sections provide direct perspectives from the project managers themselves.

6. Discussion

The increasing adoption of project management methodologies within public organisations, 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. 2.1). 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. 2.2). 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.

6.1. *Reference documents create a legitimate present for project managers*

Fig. 2 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 1) 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

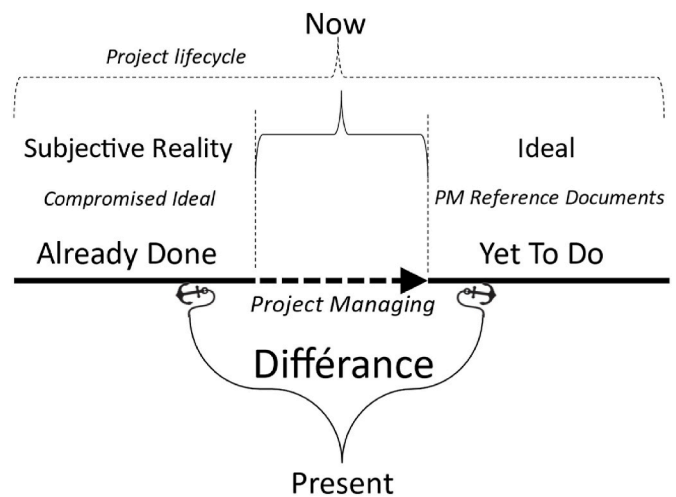


Fig. 2. The ideal (project management reference documents) anchors the situation for explanation, while différance eclipses project managing from explanation.

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.

### 6.2. 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 managing *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 recognize 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 managing is the process of overcoming hindrances and obstacles to project delivery capability (van der Hoorn and Whitty, 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 recognizing that project managing *is* deconstruction, we acknowledge its dynamic and fluid nature. It also underscores 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.

### 6.3. 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 and 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 1.

### 6.4. 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.

## 7. 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.

### 7.1. 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.

## 7.2. 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.

## 8. 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 (Blixt and Kirytopoulos, 2017; Gomes et al., 2008). 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 ETH 2023-0542.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Kevan M. Rowe:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Stephen Jonathan Whitty:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Bronte van der Hoorn:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of competing interest

None

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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