



# Identifying interesting project phenomena using philosophical and methodological triangulation

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Received 1 October 2015; received in revised form 9 May 2016; accepted 10 May 2016

Available online 28 May 2016

## Abstract

The scarcity of accepted research designs within each research philosophy paradigm limits the variance of research approaches, which reduces the chances to identify real new phenomena. We propose that researchers use triangulation of alternative research philosophies to identify interesting new phenomena, provide alternative perspectives to complex problems, and gain a richer and more holistic understanding of complex project management problems. Philosophical triangulation extends methodological triangulation into the realm of ontology and epistemology and provides for more comprehensive understanding, as it resembles a more realistic view towards social science phenomena, which, by their nature, appear differently to people, and thus are seen from different ontological perspectives simultaneously. Three related studies are used to exemplify the approach, where the results of two sets of empirical data (qualitative and quantitative) are discussed in different philosophical contexts. Implications for scholars include more practice-oriented research perspectives in line with the projects-as-practice stream by extending existing benefits from methodological triangulation into philosophical triangulation in order to identify and understand complex phenomena.

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**Keywords:** Philosophical triangulation; Research methods; Governance; Methodologies; Comparatives

## 1. Introduction

Research in project management has been criticized for its lack of relevance for practitioners (Blomquist et al., 2010; Sahlin-Andersson and Söderholm, 2002). As a result, several streams of literature developed in support of more practice-oriented approaches to research, which is manifested, among others, in new perspectives towards project management, rethinking papers, and broader concepts (Svejvig and Andersen, 2014). However, this trend is not matched by a development in research designs (Müller and Söderlund, 2015). Blomquist et al. (2010) suggest increasing a practical relevance approach to project management research by first understanding what people do within the context of projects before such projects are

investigated. Researchers following these and other related suggestions are immediately confronted with the fact that research is typically done from a narrow theoretical perspective, involving one or, at most, two different theoretical lenses towards the phenomenon under study; whereas practitioners hold a multitude of perspectives simultaneously. A theory allows researchers to understand and predict outcomes of interest, even if it is probabilistic (Kerlinger, 1973). A theory explains a process or sequence of events (Mohr, 1982), and acts as an educational device that can raise consciousness about a specific set of concepts (Brief and Dukerich, 1991). With a focus on governance which can be considered a “young” discipline in project management where there is more potential to find interesting phenomena than say a well-researched areas such as planning of risk management; examples of theories include the popular governance theories in management, such as agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976), which assumes a *homo economicus*, motivated by the lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970). With its economic focus, this theory

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fails to explain, for example, altruistic, loyal, or other behavior related to the higher levels of Maslow's theory. This is done through Stewardship Theory (Davis et al., 1997), a complementary theory to agency theory. While most of the research is done from either an agency or a stewardship perspective, the practitioner in a governance situation does not know which theory to apply at what point in time; thus, the practitioner does not know which theory to use to develop a governance system in terms of what to expect regardless of the theoretical lens used and what to expect when using either one of the two perspectives. Theories are created to provide explanations for phenomena of interest by providing an answer to the question "why something has happened?" rather than only the question "what has been observed?" (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007). So the practitioner knowing the theory will understand the cause(s) that created the observation, so they are better prepared to develop a solution that reduces, maintains, or enhances the cause(s) of the observation.

A more comprehensive understanding of phenomena arises from a researcher's simultaneous look at a phenomenon from two perspectives. This is typically done using mixed-methods studies,—an approach increasingly popular in recent years. Cameron and Molina-Azorin (2011) estimate that about 14% of business and management studies use mixed methods. However, in project management research, this number is as small as 1.5% (Cameron et al., 2015), indicating that the vast majority of researchers use a singular paradigm to understand a phenomenon under study, which does not align with the practitioners' perspectives. A research paradigm is understood in the sense of Kuhn (1996) as a particular and generally accepted combination of ontology, epistemology, and methodology to investigate a phenomenon. A single-paradigm approach risks producing results of questionable relevance for practice or failing to identify phenomena of practical relevance, due to the particular and narrow perspective of the given paradigm. Moreover, within a singular paradigm, the number of accepted research designs is limited. This leads to repetitive use of similar research designs, which then leads to almost predictable research results (Müller et al., 2013; Williams and Vogt, 2011).

This paper transfers an existing approach, known as philosophical triangulation in the sense of Bechara and Van de Ven (2011) from research in general management into the realm of transformational project management research. In line with these authors, we argue that the application of several philosophical perspectives, which includes the use of mixed-methods studies, provides for more practice-relevant identification and understanding of phenomena. Applying several perspectives simultaneously comes closer to the practitioners' reality and thereby creates more realistic situations for researchers. We further argue that more than two perspectives towards the same phenomenon will provide a more comprehensive identification of the phenomenon per se, its context, and scope. This approach extends over and above methodological triangulation into the realm of ontologies and epistemologies and uses philosophical triangulation (Bechara and Van de Ven, 2011), which makes use of methodological triangulation at the epistemological level. To that end, the

papers follows calls for more holistic approaches to research methods, such as those by Alvesson and colleagues (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013) to identify interesting phenomena in order to counteract the current scarcity in new theories (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). In doing that, we aim to contribute to pluralities of perspectives in theory development, which support theory building in the sense of Popper's (1963) suggestion for verisimilitude in theory development, Weick's (1989) claim for theory development as disciplined imagination, and Flyvbjerg's (2001) stated need for contextualization of social science research.

In this paper, we will show that philosophical triangulation can help to identify new phenomena. Using published studies that address the same phenomenon from several philosophical perspectives, we exemplify the development of insights that cannot be found through research using just one paradigm. Hence, we argue that applying this approach to project management research may lead to the identification of previously unobserved phenomena, which cannot be identified or explained within the context of one philosophical stance only. This leads to the research question:

*How can philosophical triangulation in the realm of project management research be used to identify interesting phenomena, as well as to provide alternative perspectives?*

The benefits of this study are to break free from the constraints of a single research philosophy (or paradigm) and its accepted methods, therefore allowing the researcher to identify phenomena that may not be identified using a single paradigm.

The paper continues with a review of related literature on triangulation and continues with the description of the multidimensional approach for philosophical triangulation. This is followed by the application of the approach by triangulating three distinct philosophical perspectives, which provide for new insights and new phenomena. The paper finishes with a discussion and a conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

We set out to address the question of relevant research for practitioners as a "knowledge production problem" in the sense of Van de Ven (2007), created through an unengaged process of inquiry, in which researchers deal with single theoretical models for addressing the research problem or question. We build on Van de Ven's suggestions for scholars being engaged with practitioners and other stakeholders and suggest adding philosophical multiplicity to the research design. This is required due to the limitations stemming from the use of singular research paradigms.

### 2.1. Limitations of singular research approaches

Research designs being accepted within a research paradigm shape the nature of the studies and impact the research results.

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