Critical Analysis of "Six Decades of project management research: Thematic Trends and future opportunities": Evaluating Methods, Findings, and Implications

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Introduction

The authors Milind Padalkar and Saji Gopinath (2016) embarked on their scholarly journey by introducing the captivating realm of project management and shedding light on the remarkable surge of research interest in this field over the past 15 years. They astutely emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of project management, which has led to a substantial body of literature across various domains and research areas. Yet, amidst this profusion of existing knowledge, the authors discerned a conspicuous absence of convergence in two critical aspects of project management: the evaluation of project performance and the dearth of a robust theoretical foundation within this discipline. It is precisely this void in the literature that the authors seek to address through their meticulous analysis of existing scholarly works.

To commence their investigative pursuit, the authors formulated three pivotal research questions to guide their study. Firstly, they endeavored to unearth the underlying themes characterizing the evolutionary trajectory of project management research in the past. Secondly, they aimed to discern the progression of these themes in recent project management research. Lastly, they sought to identify the latest trends in research and ascertain the direction in which these emerging themes are presently heading.

In the pursuit of analyzing the philosophical underpinnings inherent in any research endeavor, the authors astutely encountered the concepts of ontology and epistemology. Ontology, being concerned with the fundamental nature of reality and the manner in which it truly exists, confronts us with existential questions. On the other hand, epistemology deals with elucidating and comprehending this reality. Employing a highly methodical approach, the authors undertook an extensive analysis of the existing literature, skillfully categorizing the last six decades into three distinct eras: the deterministic era, the explanatory era, and the non-deterministic era. Such classification was undertaken with the explicit intention of facilitating a comprehensive and insightful analysis.

The article notably highlights the lack of consensus on the ontological and epistemological assumptions within the previous literature spanning these three eras. While one era primarily focuses on the utilization of conceptual and analytical models to explore the efficacy of project management, others lean towards empirical and conceptual methodologies to evaluate the performance of project management techniques. This lack of consensus underscores the

need for further exploration and scholarly discourse to establish a unified understanding of the ontological and epistemological foundations that underpin project management research. The authors Milind Padalkar and Saji Gopinath (2016) meticulous examination of the literature exposes the existing gaps in the evaluation of project performance and the dearth of a solid theoretical foundation in project management. By posing pertinent research questions and embarking on a comprehensive analysis, they navigate the complex terrain of project management research, shedding light on the evolutionary trends and identifying areas where further exploration and convergence are required. Their astute classification of eras and exploration of ontological and epistemological assumptions pave the way for future scholars to engage in fruitful dialogue and propel the field of project management toward greater coherence and understanding.

Critical Review of Article

Table 1 explains the different ontological and epistemological approaches which can be used to explain the research philosophy.

4th column of Table 1 shows that the present article does not predict anything and also does not present a single reality. From the Ontological and Epistemological point of view, the article lies under interpretivism (Walsham, 2006). However, since the findings and discussions have a restriction and cannot be completely subjective, because the article's input is extant literature well documented in the popular and established database, this article is partially based on pragmatism.

Table 1 Comparative Aspects of Research Philosophies

Ontological Stance	Epistemological Stance	Axiological Stance	Research Philosophy	Evaluation of Article Under Review
Singular reality	Examine using established designs and tools	Terminal goal: The Ultimate aim of science (researcher is value-free)	Positivism/Objectivism	NA
Multiple realities	Examine using an interpretive approach	Researcher' Subjectivity persists (value-bound)	Constructivism/ Interpretivism	Yes
Singular and multiple realities	Examine using the best tool	Value plays a large role in interpreting the results	Pragmatism	Partially

Axiology is related to the "aims" of a research inquiry. It gives the clarification that whether the researchers are predicting something or just trying to understand it (Lee & Lings, 2008).

The present paper has done an open and wide discussion on the existing body of knowledge in the areas over a good time span i.e., 60 years. It has not achieved any terminal goal but rather has raised eyebrows towards the areas which have been less explored on the given topic. Considering this, the articles do not fulfill the first kind of axiology that the research is predicting something. However, it leads to the understanding of the phenomenon. The paper has been published in a peer-review journal, hence as per axiology approaches, it is a scientific product fulfilling an instrumental goal.

From the axiology angle, another criticism of the current research is that it is not "value-free" (Walsham, 1995). In the methodology section, the authors clearly mentioned, "We preferred literature reviews having the broader scope and excluded single journal reviews, reviews with geographical limitations, or those with *restricted scope"*. This makes the selection of the articles highly subjective and the research approach "value bound". The article highlights that the extant literature across these three eras has taken all the possible ontological and epistemological stances. As a result, a weak ontological, epistemological, and methodological convergence exists in project management research.
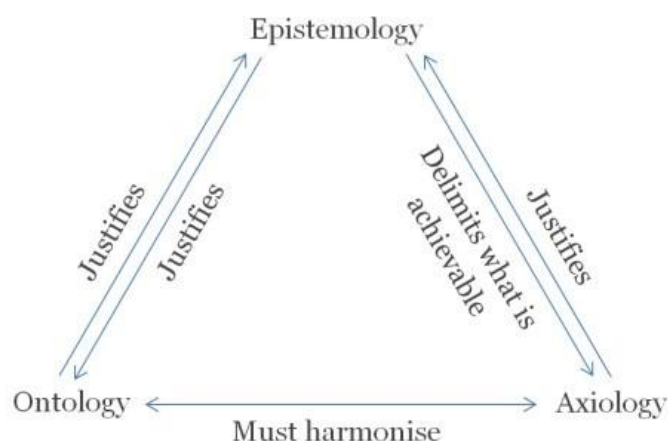

Figure 1 Harmony among the concept of

The second part of the systematic Literature Review presented in this article examines the thematic progression over the three sub-periods of 5 years each in the last 15 years. The article highlights that while the research output in the field of project management across domains has been increasing during this specified period, the research influence has been decreasing, suggesting the maturation of existing themes and the lack of emergence of new themes.

The authors have used the *"Systematic Literature Review"* (SLR) approach (Paul et al., 2021). The article presents a good analysis of the existing theoretical concepts and a structured approach to future research in project management. The article can highlight the existing research gaps and present a detailed outline of addressing these gaps through new perspectives and approaches. It also shows how these new approaches could solve the existing ambiguity while analyzing the project management domain. Based on the provided material, let's revise the strengths and weaknesses of the study:

Strengths:

Comprehensive literature review: The study conducted a systematic review of project management literature, analyzing a sample of 36 studies to examine motivations, themes, and trends in PM research. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of existing research.

Identification of research directions: The study identified three major prescriptions for research directions in project management, including paradigmatic or methodological prescriptions, alternate perspectives, and focus on research outcomes. This provides valuable guidance for future research in the field.

Thematic analysis: The study analyzed the thematic progression over three sub-periods and identified the leading themes in project management research. This analysis provides insights into the main areas of focus and research quantum.

Identification of gaps and opportunities: The study identified areas where research attention is minimal, such as quality, scope, integration, and communication in project management. It also highlighted the need for a non-deterministic perspective and integration of empirical and conceptual research in risk management. These findings present opportunities for future research.

Weaknesses:

Limited alignment with research directions: The study found that only 18% of the sample referenced the 21 papers on research directions, indicating a low level of alignment with calls for change. This suggests that project management research remains broadly anchored in traditional paradigms and methodologies.

Lack of theoretical development: The study acknowledges the weak theories in project management literature. While it identifies thematic evolution and trends, it does not explicitly address the development of robust theoretical frameworks in the field.

Methodological limitations: The study's thematic analysis is based on well-cited articles from project-focused journals, which may introduce a bias toward certain themes. Additionally, the proposed measure of research influence is novel and may have limitations compared to alternative measures.

Limited generalizability: The study focuses on a specific set of meta-narratives and relies on a small sample size of 36 studies. This may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader field of project management.

Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the motivations, themes, and trends in project management research. However, there are limitations in terms of alignment with research directions, theoretical development, and generalizability. Future research should address these limitations to further advance the field of project management.

Conclusion:

The article by Milind Padalkar and Saji Gopinath (2016) makes a significant contribution to the field of project management by addressing the gaps in the evaluation of project performance and the lack of a robust theoretical foundation. Through a meticulous analysis of

existing scholarly works, the authors shed light on the evolutionary trends in project management research and identify areas where further exploration and convergence are needed.

The authors employ a systematic literature review approach to comprehensively analyze the existing literature, categorizing it into three distinct eras: the deterministic era, the explanatory era, and the non-deterministic era. They highlight the lack of consensus on the ontological and epistemological assumptions within these eras, emphasizing the need for a unified understanding of the foundational aspects of project management research.

The study identifies the thematic progression in project management research over three sub-periods and highlights the existing research gaps and opportunities. It provides valuable insights into the main areas of focus and research quantum, suggesting directions for future research in the field. The authors also identify the limitations of the current research, including limited alignment with research directions, a lack of theoretical development, methodological limitations, and limited generalizability.

Despite these limitations, the article offers comprehensive and insightful analysis, making it a valuable resource for researchers and scholars in the field of project management. It provides guidance for future research by identifying areas for further exploration, integration of empirical and conceptual research, and the development of robust theoretical frameworks.

Overall, the article by Padalkar and Gopinath contributes to the coherence and understanding of project management by addressing the gaps in evaluation and theoretical foundations. It sets the stage for future scholars to engage in fruitful dialogue and advance the field towards greater convergence and development.

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