Rethinking project management: A structured literature review with a critical look at the brave new world

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a structured review of the rethinking project management (RPM) literature based on the classification and analysis of 74 contributions and in addition takes a critical look at this brave new world. Through the analysis, a total of 6 overarching categories emerged: contextualization, social and political aspects, rethinking practice, complexity and uncertainty, actuality of projects and broader conceptualization. These categories cover a broad range of different contributions with diverse and alternative perspectives on project management. The early RPM literature dates back to the 1980s, while the majority was published in 2006 onwards, and the research stream appears to be still active. A critical look at this brave new world exhibits the overall challenge for RPM to become much more diffused and accepted. © 2014 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Rethinking project management; Literature review; Project management research; Classical project management

1. Introduction

The management of projects is of considerable economic importance and dramatic growth has occurred in project work across different sectors, industries and countries (Turner et al., 2010; Winter et al., 2006c). Projects have become an important way to structure work in most organizations (Bakker, 2010) and constitute one of the most important organizational developments (Winter et al., 2006c). Despite the substantial increase in the importance and propagation of projects, the conceptual base of models and methodologies for project management has remained fairly static in the past (Koskela and Howell, 2002) and has long been dominated by a technocratic and rationalistic viewpoint (Morris et al., 2011b; Packendorff, 1995) – hereafter denoted classical project management – which has received substantial criticism for its shortcomings in practice (Koskela and Howell, 2002; Sahlin-Andersson and Söderholm, 2002).

Accordingly, several scholars have started to think more widely about projects and project management as a reaction to the classical view, but also as a response to the challenges of carrying out projects in practice and the poor track record of previous projects (Morris et al., 2011b). This wider thinking has developed many new insights over the years, such as moving from the “project as a tool” approach to the idea of the “project as a temporary organization” (Packendorff, 1995) and understanding project management as a holistic discipline for achieving organizational efficiency, effectiveness and innovation (Jugdev et al., 2001). This more holistic and pluralistic understanding of project management holds a great deal of potential for enhancing and expanding the current knowledge and practice within the field and has been labeled “rethinking project management” (RPM) (Winter et al., 2006c). RPM has evolved over many years, despite the hegemony of the dominant view and often in contrast to this view.
It is time to take stock of what we know about RPM and look critically at the brave new world – and there are several reasons for such a structured literature review. First, RPM is a diverse research area and a literature review can offer useful input to the conceptualization of the RPM concept by establishing a more integrated view and setting boundaries. Second, an understanding of the development of RPM over time makes it possible to elucidate RPM with all its sub-versions from a broader historical perspective, enabling us to see how the components of the current stock were added and basically how we arrived at the current situation. Finally, we analyze the past in order to prepare for the future (Webster and Watson, 2002) with the aim of keeping this research area viable and stimulating theoretical as well as professional development. We formulate our research questions from the above: (1) How can we conceptualize RPM and how has it developed over time? (2) How can future research expand the RPM research area?

We conducted a literature review consisting of two parts in order to address the research questions: the first part was an explorative and less structured literature search for alternatives to classical project management; this was followed by the second part, which was a rigid structured literature review consisting of four phases, starting with the definition of the review scope, the conceptualization of RPM, literature searches with key words and finally the literature analysis. In particular, the scoping and selection represented a challenging process in order to establish a more integrated view and set appropriate boundaries for RPM, in which we included as examples the UK RPM initiative (Winter et al., 2006c), the Scandinavian school of project studies (Sahlin-Andersson and Söderholm, 2002) and practice studies (Blomquist et al., 2010), but excluded for instance the making projects critical research stream (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006).

This review consists of 74 contributions, which we classified and analyzed. We set out to provide an overview of the existing RPM body of knowledge by focusing on the basic principles behind the RPM literature and how it is differentiated from the classical view. Through the analysis, a total of 6 overarching categories emerged: contextualization, social and political aspects, rethinking practice, complexity and uncertainty, actuality of projects and broader conceptualization. These categories cover a broad range of different contributions with diverse and alternative perspectives on project management. A critical discussion about

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<tr>
<td>Packendorf (1995, p. 328)</td>
<td>Project metaphor: the project as a tool Process: linear, with the phases plan, control and evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jugdev et al. (2001, p. 36)</td>
<td>Project management: as a set of tools and techniques used to achieve project efficiencies Success: measured by efficiency performance metrics Practice project management: focus on the project details at the operational level and tactically</td>
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<td>Winter et al. (2006c, p. 642, original emphasis)</td>
<td>Simple life-cycle-based models of projects, as the dominant model of project and project management with the (often unexamined) assumption that the life-cycle model is (assumed to be) the actual terrain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shenhar and Dvir (2007, p. 11, original emphasis)</td>
<td>Approach: traditional project management Project goal: completing the job on time, on budget and within the requirements Management style: one size fits all Perspective: task perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andersen (2008, p. 5, 10, 49)</td>
<td>Perspective: task perspective Project definition: a project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result (Project Management Institute, 2004, p. 5) Main focus: execute the defined task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenfle and Loch (2010, p. 45)</td>
<td>Project type and target: routine execution, target given and defined from above Examples of domain of relevance: • Known markets and customer reactions • Known performance drivers of developed systems • Known environmental parameters</td>
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the brave new world follows the analysis, in which we exhibit the overall challenge for RPM to become much more diffused and accepted.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section describes how we conceptualize classical project management versus rethinking project management. The methodology for the literature review process is then reported, followed by an analysis of the 74 papers classified into 6 categories. We continue by taking a critical look at “the brave new world” of RPM research in order to suggest future research areas, and finally we present the conclusion.

2. Conceptualizing classical project management versus rethinking project management

We will abstain from defining classical project management and rethinking project management as both concepts are understood and used very broadly. We will instead pursue the conceptualization of both concepts in terms of their important features and how they supplement each other.

We draw on several scholars who have specified alternative views and compared them with the classical view. Some of these are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1 illustrates the understanding of the classical view as execution- and task-oriented while the rethinking view(s) reflects a broader and more holistic perspective in which projects might be conceptualized as temporary organizations (see also Bakker, 2010). The relationship between the classical and the rethinking view should not be interpreted as dichotomic but on the contrary as dualistic, combining “old truths and new insights” (Jugdev et al., 2001). Söderlund (2011) argued, in line with this, for a pluralistic understanding of project management and presented seven schools of thought — for example, one of the schools mentioned is the optimization school, which to some extent resembles the classical view. Although the schools of thought are interesting, the insight from the pluralistic understanding is more important in the rethinking context and can be compared with pluralism in organizational theory (Scott and Davis, 2007).

One way to describe these multiple perspectives is to use metaphors. Morgan proposed eight metaphors for an organization (e.g. machine, organism and brain) and stated that metaphors imply “a way of thinking and a way of seeing … but also a way of not seeing” (Morgan, 1997, pp. 4–5). We have to use several metaphors in order to study organizations as each way of seeing will provide unique insights with strengths and limitations (Morgan, 1997, p. 352). Turner and colleagues (Turner et al., 2010) took up the metaphorical approach and presented nine metaphors for project management — for example, they characterized the optimization school as the project as a machine, which embeds the view that the project is a system requiring optimization (in line with Söderlund, 2011).

The schools of thought (Bredillet, 2007; Söderlund, 2011) developed within academia, based on reviews and maps of project management research — this certainly stimulated the rethinking agenda for research (which also appeared to be the purpose). However, a UK-based research network followed a different approach to rethinking project management, involving many leading researchers in project management and senior practitioners from industry. The network’s aims were: (1) to develop the field of project management and improve the real-world practice and (2) to define an interdisciplinary research agenda to enrich and extend the field beyond its current foundations (Winter et al., 2006b, p. 650).

The main findings from the network resulted in a framework of five directions to develop the area intellectually (see also Winter et al. (2006c) in Table 1). These areas are project complexity, social process, value creation, conceptualization and practitioner development. Each of these has an impact on the themes that were identified as being key: projectification, programs, the actuality of projects, uncertainty, business projects, professionalization and practitioner development (Maylor, 2006, p. 636). The five directions and associated themes thus summarize their proposal for rethinking project management.

We distilled the above-mentioned findings into some important features representing the classical and rethinking project management concepts, as shown in Fig. 1 below:

The features in Fig. 1 are not meant to be exhaustive for the two concepts, but on the contrary to highlight the important key characteristics. We adapt the understanding put forward by the UK rethinking initiative (Maylor, 2006) that the classical concept is embedded in the rethinking concept, which means that the rethinking concept enhances the classical concept rather than discarding it (Winter et al., 2006c). Furthermore, we understand both concepts as non-monolithic entities, implying

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**Fig. 1. Important features of the classical and rethinking project management concepts.**
multiple interpretations with many sub-versions (inspired by Meyer and Hammerschmid, 2006).
This conceptualization forms the basis for the paper’s methodological approach to a structured literature review about rethinking project management.

3. Methodology for the literature review process

3.1. Part 1: Explorative and unstructured literature review

An explorative and unstructured literature search about alternatives to the classical view initiated this study. We discovered the rethinking initiative in the UK (e.g. Winter et al., 2006c) fairly early on in this initial process. We sought out knowledge about the UK process, as well as other ways to rethink project management, in an explorative fashion, which provided us with knowledge about the field and a foundation for further studies. Through the initial process, we found 26 different articles, textbooks, etc. to be relevant, offering new alternative perspectives and new insights into the traditional approach (some of them are referenced in Table 1).

3.2. Part 2: Framework for the structured literature review

Part 2 followed a more structured and systematic approach. Conducting a systematic literature review needs an explicit research method that uses literature as an input, instead of observations, interviews or questionnaire data in empirical studies (Müller et al., 2014). Tranfield et al. defined a systematic review as “a replicable, scientific and transparent process ... that aims to minimize bias ... by providing an audit trail of the reviewers decisions, procedures and conclusions” (Tranfield et al., 2003, p. 209). By consulting literature reviews (Bakker, 2010; Müller et al., 2014; Söderlund, 2011) and research methods about literature reviews (Broke et al., 2009; Hart, 1998; Pawson et al., 2005; Tranfield et al., 2003), it is possible to synthesize a pattern for the literature review as follows: (1) plan the review, (2) clarify the scope and conceptualize the topic, (3) search, evaluate and select literature, (4) analyze the selected literature and finally (5) report and disseminate. More specifically, we adapted the approach in Fig. 2 below (inspired by Vom Brocke et al., 2009):

Fig. 2 presents the four phases used in the structured literature review. Although it is possible to separate the phases analytically, the actual research process was iterative, but is still presented in a structured manner. The four phases are discussed in the following.

Phase 1: The study’s review scope (Vom Brocke et al., 2009) focused on the research outcomes and theories of the rethinking literature. The coverage of the structured literature review was rather comprehensive with the purpose of including most of the literature within the defined scope.

Phase 2: As stated above, it is possible to describe the project management literature as either classical project management or rethinking project management; however, the two categories are not monolithic and all-inclusive (i.e. many project management topics are not included in the two categories). The present review’s intention is to present an assessment of the alternative perspectives that have emerged as a result of, for example, the rethinking initiative in the UK (Winter et al., 2006c). For this reason, the outset of the current study was the identification of key terms and topics from the UK study that could be used in further search processes. Initially, we decided that the key concepts would be rethinking project management and reinventing project management.

Phase 3: In part 2, the goal was to create a search process that, ideally, would both encompass the literature from the initial search process in part 1 and capture other relevant literature. Consequently, we identified relevant search strings for each of the 26 publications found through the initial study, which was a highly iterative process. The iterative development of search strings is listed in Appendix A. Table 2 presents the results:

The next step involved selecting the relevant contributions (articles and books) from the search result with 1279 entries in the four databases, as shown in Table 2 above. Each of the authors separately evaluated the result against the RPM conceptualization presented in the previous chapter, thereby performing triangulation (i.e. multiple investigators) (Bryman, 2008, p. 379). This entailed first examining the title and, if necessary, the keywords and the abstract. The authors presented the selected lists to each other and through a joint process this

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<th>Databases</th>
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resulted in 110 contributions consisting of “included” and “maybe included” contributions. The authors scrutinized the “maybe included” contributions again and selected a net list of 74 contributions (these are marked in the reference list with an asterisk). We will discuss the criteria for including and excluding contributions in more detail in the following.

Inclusions: (1) The core of the conceptualization of RPM is the UK-based network initiative from 2004 to 2006, which is documented in the “Special issue on rethinking project management” (e.g. Winter et al., 2006c), and it is easy to identify and include papers in this category. (2) The next area is the Scandinavian school of project studies, which shares many ideas with the UK initiative, such as a broader conceptualization, including and excluding contributions in more detail in the following.

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The inductive analysis resulted in the six categories shown in Table 3 below. Since these categories are rather broad – the aim was to identify few, but broad categories with little overlapping – they will be elaborated upon in the following.

**Contextualization** covers literature that describes how projects need to expand beyond the narrow goals of isolated projects and encourage thinking about projects in a broader context by focusing on the management of multiple projects, the organizational strategy and the project environment. For example, Dille and Söderlund (2011) described how the conventional analysis of project organizations has neglected the institutional environment and how institutional arrangements can severely limit projects. Another example is the work of Alderman and Ivory (2010), who examined how the meta-project context impacts on service-led projects. By existing within the context of a meta-project, these projects encompass considerations of activities beyond the normal remits of the project manager. Another subtheme within this category is the management of multiple projects. For example, Aritua et al. (2009, p. 72) argued that the management of multiple projects “presents challenges that are fundamentally different from single project management.” In connection with the management of multiple projects, Aritua et al. (2009) proposed the use of complexity theory to understand how it is possible to see the multi-project environment as being made up of complex adaptive systems. Yet another example from this category is the work presented by Maylor et al. (2006), who pointed out that programs and portfolios are a mechanism for management in organizations and that they create issues that reach beyond the problems associated with single projects. Hence, project management skills and techniques are not necessarily transferable to the management of multiple projects. A different example within this category is the use of Kaikaku project management, which integrates the corporate strategy into the project by seeing it as an open value system (Ohara and Asada, 2009).

The category social and political aspects includes literature with a focus on social and political processes rather than the traditional focus on specific tools and procedures. For example, Leybourne (2007) described how the emphasis is changing from a dominating focus on tools and techniques towards the social and behavioral elements of the management of projects and how research within project management is expanding. On the other hand, Clarke (2010) explored how emotions can potentially influence project managers’ behavior and decisions when playing their role in relationship management in projects. The author suggested that project managers should use their understanding and awareness of their emotions and those of others more actively in projects. Sense (2009), on the other hand, focused on learning in relation to projects and more specifically on the importance of social learning within projects and project teams through an alternative characterization of projects. Small and Walker (2010) showed how project complexity is socially derived with differences created from human plurality. This implies that the project management strategy should go through continual adaptation in order to respond to the changing power and politics within project practice.

**Rethinking practice** encompasses literature that suggests alternative methods, perspectives and approaches to rethink the ways in which practitioners work with projects, for example, suggestions on how to educate project managers to enable them to cope better with the increasing complexity and uncertainty in project environments (Thomas and Mengel, 2008). Berggren and Söderlund (2008) showed how educational practices can be developed in order to stimulate knowledge co-production between practitioners and academia in order to improve project management education. Louw and Rwelamila (2012) examined a sample of South African higher education institutions to determine whether they had incorporated some of the thoughts and concepts from, for example, the rethinking process in the UK into their curricula. The different ways of rethinking education are often linked to the concept of the reflective practitioner or similar concepts. This is the case for Louw and Rwelamila (2012) since they, among other rethinking topics, examined whether the educational institutions linked project managers with reflective practitioners. Yet another example is the case of Sewchurran (2008, p. 316), who presented “an alternative to the prescriptive, model based, instrumental approaches” with the aim of achieving better-educated, self-organizing and reflexive project practitioners. Apart from literature more focused on the educational side of project management, this category also encompasses literature dealing with reflective practice in general, improvisation and contingency approaches and ways to rethink or improve
practice. It is related to the work of authors such as Crawford et al. (2006), who stressed that increasing project complexity demands the education of more reflective project practitioners, in touch with the newest theory and research, rather than solely focusing on technical skills. Similarly, Thomas and Mengel (2008) argued that complexity, uncertainty and chaos play an increasingly important role in projects and project environments. While project management training programs focus on standardization of the field, the increasing complexity requires other forms of professional development of project managers. Kreiner argued that “Achieving desired goals flexibly in unfolding realities, and implementing prior plans, are both important aspects of the project manager’s work.” This dilemma is, according to Kreiner, important to keep in mind as a project manager since he otherwise risks “taking the plans literally” (Kreiner, 2012, p. 715). Instead, the project manager should be prepared to adapt the plan since it might be rendered inadequate and imperfect by a changing and turbulent environment. In a similar way, Leybourne (2010), for example, argued in his study that managers within successful organizations allow their employees significant freedom to experiment, for example with task management and unstructured practices of work.

The category complexity and uncertainty consists of contributions that deal with the increasing uncertainty and complexity in projects, project environments, etc. These are evident in the work of Atkinson et al. (2006, p. 687), who, based on discussions that took place as part of the RPM network in the UK, identified a wide range of sources of uncertainty and stated that: “More sophisticated efforts to recognize and manage important sources of uncertainty are needed.” To deal with such increasing complexity, these authors proposed alternative perspectives and theories, such as evolutionary management and self-organization (Saynisch, 2010a), and systems thinking (Sheffield et al., 2012). As Kreiner (1995) pointed out, people involved in projects must recognize that the originally intended outcomes will not necessarily remain relevant over time since the environment often drifts, thereby risking and undermining the success of the project. Cooke-Davies et al. (2007) conducted a review of the major ideas within complexity science and evaluated their potential relevance to the project management field, focusing especially on ideas with direct relevance to social complexity associated with the people who are involved in delivering complex projects. Though the contributions often did not identify complexity as a main category, it frequently served as an underlying argument for rethinking practice (e.g. Sheffield et al., 2012).

The actuality of projects covers literature that underlines the need for empirical studies of projects as its own point of departure. A general argument within this category is that: “while a great deal is written about traditional project management, we know very little about the ‘actuality’ of project based working and management” (Cicmil et al., 2006, p. 675). Blomquist et al. (2010, p. 5), for example, also pointed this out, by stating that research into projects is “[...] insubstantial when it comes to understanding what occurs in projects.” For this reason, Blomquist et al. (2010) outlined the project-as-practice approach to research. The authors argued that whereas traditional project research departs from some overall concepts and models from which action is derived, the practice perspective begins with the individual actions and asks what overall models and concepts result from those actions. Similarly, Packendorff (1995) argued that the research on project management is not sufficiently empirical. While project management research generally views projects as similar, these simple classifications are mainly due to the fact that research has only made empirical observations to a limited extent (Packendorff, 1995).

Broader conceptualization deals with contributions that offer alternative perspectives on, for example, projects, project management and project success, outline how the field is broadening beyond its current limits or describe the existing perspectives within the field. Tumer et al. (2010) outlined nine different perspectives of projects, for example the project as a machine, the project as a mirror, etc. On the other hand, McLeod et al. (2012) explored the evaluation of project success from a subjectivist perspective. Through a longitudinal case study, the authors investigated how different stakeholders perceived the project outcomes and how they evaluated success, from which they derived a conceptual framework. Kolliveti et al. (2007) studied the project management literature and showed how the dominance of each perspective has changed over time. Through a case study, Koppenjan et al. (2011) showed how project managers acknowledge and combine different competing perspectives in practice in order to meet the requirements of control and flexibility.

The categorization of the 74 contributions resulted in their distribution among the 6 different topics, as shown in Fig. 3 below:

Fig. 3 reflects the main categories within the different contributions. Still, some papers touched upon more than one category. As mentioned, complexity and uncertainty and rethinking practice were often related. As also shown in Fig. 3, each topic covered at least six contributions, while the most represented topics were broader conceptualization followed by complexity and uncertainty. While broader conceptualization on the one hand is a broad category in itself, it is also by far the largest, with a total of 27 contributions. One argument for this could be that the research stream has been preoccupied with more conceptual and theoretical research since there was an initial need to define projects and broaden our understanding of projects and their setting. On the other hand, social and political aspects together with the actuality of projects were the least represented categories. It is interesting that while many of the authors within the RPM research stream argued for alternative approaches to project management rather than the rationalistic one employed within the classical approach, only a minority of the rethinking literature has a primary focus on the social aspects related to projects. Again, this might be related to the fact that there was an initial need for the research stream to establish itself and its view on projects before endeavoring to undertake further studies of practice. The fact that social and political aspects together with the actuality of projects were also rather small themes within the research stream suggests that a well-grounded empirical understanding of
projects is not particularly strong within the RPM research stream and that there has been a primary emphasis on the theoretical base.

The development of the RPM literature over time is shown in Fig. 4 below:

Fig. 4 shows the increase in RPM literature since 2006, and this is most likely to be a result of the RPM initiative in the UK, which lasted from March 2004 to May 2006 (Winter et al., 2006c). In consequence, the above figure illustrates that the research stream has been active since the RPM initiative in 2006. Accordingly, 59 of the 74 contributions were published after 2005, which amounts to approximately 80% of the identified literature. While we could argue that the move towards more alternative thinking is a product of significant efforts by central actors within the project management community, as the above Fig. 4 would suggest, there might be other explanations for such a significant movement within project management research. One might be a general movement in the field away from objectivistic views towards a more subjectivistic understanding and enquiries on projects, which in turn would lead to more heterogeneous and situated views and concepts on projects in general. Our analysis in this regard showed that only a small fraction of the identified RPM literature employed an objectivistic view — we identified a total of 6 papers as objectivistic and 62 as subjectivistic, while 6 papers from the literature review was not classified as either objectivistic or subjectivistic. This seems to relate to the changing nature of project management from a hard paradigm to a soft paradigm (Pollack, 2007), for which the RPM literature generally subscribes to the subjectivistic soft paradigm.

Departing from the findings from the analysis, the next section will take a critical view of RPM research.

5. A critical look at “the brave new world”

Although the rethinking concept might be seen as a promising road for project management for both research and professional practice, it is also essential to take a critical look at “the brave new world” and use this critical look to discuss how future research can expand and advance RPM research.
The overall challenge for RPM is to become much more diffused and accepted as a useful enhancement of CPM. Although we have a solid body of knowledge for RPM, it is still lacking wide diffusion into practice, and this is really a major change for the profession and academia, which will be discussed in the following.

First, the rethinking literature generally assumes that classical project management is the dominant view; for example, Morris et al. (2011b, p. 2) stated that classical project management “is the tradition that still dominates many of the textbooks to this day and whose positivist, normative character arguably underlies the dominant professional model of the discipline — its body of knowledge (Project Management Institute, 2008),” and this view is supported by others (Andersen, 2008; Packendorff, 1995). This line of thought is easy to follow and indirectly supported by this literature review, as most of the literature that we encountered initially appeared to follow the classical view (we selected only 74 out of 1279 contributions obtained in the search process). However, it would be surprising if the early studies on the rethinking view (Lichtenberg, 1983; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Packendorff, 1995) have only had a slight influence on academia and practitioners.

Furthermore, Fig. 4 indicates an increase in the rethinking literature from 2006, so the classical view might face increasing challenges, although it has been in existence since before the Second World War (Lenfle and Loch, 2010; Morris, 2013) and is certainly highly institutionalized. There is thus a danger that the assumption of the dominant view has become a rationalized myth (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) that is reiterated repeatedly, while both scholars and practitioners are in fact in motion.

Especially experienced practitioners might be aware of the challenges of the classical view (Svejvig, 2012) and able to apply practices that circumvent some of the problems encountered in the classical approach. One example is a study by Häggren and Söderholm (2011, pp. 508–509), in which the project plans were obviously a rational part of the project management toolbox for progress reporting (the classical view), but they observed that the project plans also fulfilled the broader purpose of enhancing understanding and facilitating negotiations (the rethinking view). The findings from the study indicate that the project plans were used further than in the classical view and were able to illuminate the complex terrain in practice (Winter et al., 2006c). This limited example illustrates the potential gap between the dominant classical view as the majority of the literature (the theoretical view) has described and presented and how it is enacted in practice. We thus need to understand the degree to which CPM is a rationalized myth legitimizing project management as “proper” (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008), while practitioners might enact project management in a different way, closer to RPM thinking.

Second, a natural question that follows concerns the current status of RPM in practice. The UK initiative was launched back in 2006, but we do not know much about the diffusion and acceptance of RPM either in the UK or in other countries on a broader scale. Pollack (2007) discussed the changing nature of project management from the hard paradigm (objectivistic) to the soft paradigm (subjectivistic), and this study clearly confirms that the RPM literature belongs to the soft paradigm (62 out of 74 contributions were subjectivistic), but we lack a better understanding of how the potential paradigmatic change is reflected in practice.

Several of the papers in this literature review discussed project management education and practitioner development (Berggren and Söderlund, 2008; Crawford et al., 2006; Louw and Rwelamila, 2012). Education is one of the main areas to address if we want to set RPM on the agenda and to imprint future and current project managers and project participants. The senior-level education programs described by Berggren and Söderlund (2008) seem promising, and the same applies to the diverse MBA programs with a focus on developing reflective practitioners, e.g. at Manchester University (Crawford et al., 2006). However, these are scattered examples, and we need a more thorough understanding of the share of RPM-inspired education compared with more traditional project management education including certification and commercial training, as well as how to increase this share. To this end, Crawford et al.’s (2006) paper provides interesting recommendations for practitioner development within project management.

CPM is highly institutionalized and strongly supported by “de facto standards” or “best practices,” like PMBok (Project Management Body of Knowledge) (Project Management Institute, 2008) and PRINCE2-2009 (Projects in Controlled Environments) (Office of Government Commerce, 2009). Certification programs are associated with PMBok, PRINCE2 and others, and they retain and reinforce the classical view of project management. We need to consider how we can influence the project management associations around the world in order to critique, contribute to and update this formal body of knowledge and the associated certification programs with RPM thinking (Morris et al., 2006), as this might be a necessary, but also very difficult, road to a higher degree of diffusion of RPM.

Third, classical project management has been criticized for being insufficient for praxis and the practices applied (Koskela and Howell, 2002; Morris, 1994; Morris et al., 2011b; Winter and Szczepanek, 2009). Morris (1994, p. 2) argued:

Modern project management emerged between the 1930s and the 1950s... Despite its long development, the concepts and techniques of project management now available to the general practitioner, however advanced and specific they may be, are often inadequate to the overall task of managing projects successfully.

Morris and colleagues more or less reiterated the statement in the recent Oxford Handbook of Project Management (Morris et al., 2011b), thereby indicating that the practices did not develop much between 1994 and 2011 — furthermore, other authors back this up (Lenfle and Loch, 2010; Saynisch, 2010b).
With this in mind, it would be logical for the RPM research stream to focus particularly on offering alternative practices, which have been proven in praxis, showing superiority to classical project management. However, only 7 out of 74 papers have this detailed practice focus on researching the actuality of projects, and this certainly prompts more practice-oriented studies (Van de Ven, 2007). We need these more practice-oriented studies in order to convince industry and practitioners about the potential value of rethinking project management. Classical project management is so highly institutionalized that changing the mindset is a real long-term institutional change (Van de Ven and Hargrave, 2004).

It furthermore appears to be highly relevant to discuss performance achievements from classical project management versus RPM, because a real driver of “RPM in practice” could be that it outperforms classical project management. However, performance, value and success are complex concepts that can be considered as multi-dimensional, dynamic and relative (inspired by Berg, 2001), making them difficult to compare in a sensible way, and this has to be taken into account. Multidimensionality might mean measuring efficiency, effectiveness and innovation (Jugdev et al., 2001) and have a performance perspective far beyond traditional value creation and benefit realization (Bradley, 2010; Breese, 2012; Ward and Daniel, 2012). In any case, “RPM in practice” and the performance of RPM (compared with classical project management) are important themes for RPM research.

This critical look at the brave new world has posed several questions and highlighted unexplored avenues that can be used to expand and advance RPM research and practitioner development.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper presented the results of a structured literature review of the published RPM literature based on the classification and analysis of 74 contributions and in addition took a critical look at this brave new world. The first research question regarded how RPM could be conceptualized and how it has developed over time. The conceptualization of RPM was distilled into important features representing the classical view and how RPM embeds the classical view (i.e. enhancing rather than discarding it) (see Fig. 1), and this was further elaborated with the 6 overarching categories from the literature analysis of the 74 contributions: contextualization, social and political aspects, rethinking practice, complexity and uncertainty, actuality of projects and broader conceptualization. RPM has developed over time, with scattered contributions until 2006, after which it became more consistently represented with a few yearly contributions. An important outcome of this paper is thus a more integrated view with clearer boundaries for RPM. The second research question concerned how future research can expand RPM, and this was answered by taking a critical look at this brave new world in which the overall challenge for RPM is to become much more diffused and accepted. This has several ramifications, such as: (1) a potential misleading assumption of the dominant classical view embedded in the RPM literature, in which practice is enacted in a different way, closer to RPM thinking; (2) insufficient knowledge about the current status of RPM in practice, the share of RPM thinking in project management education and the apparent lack of RPM influence on the formal body of knowledge and certification programs; and (3) finally, a need for more practice-oriented studies (Blomquist et al., 2010; Cicmil et al., 2006; Van de Ven, 2007) in order to convince industry and practitioners about the value of RPM and to support reflective practitioner development.

There are some limitations to this paper. First, the conceptualization of the RPM research stream is broad and readers should consider it as non-monolithic with many sub-versions. This implies a great diversity of the literature reviewed, with the danger of being too inclusive, but also invites further studies of conceptualizations of RPM and the positioning of RPM within project management research, which can bring greater clarity to RPM. A second limitation is that we might have missed some potentially relevant literature, although we followed a detailed and structured search process as presented in the methodology section and appendix. We aimed to present our literature review in a very transparent way in order to exhibit any potential shortcomings in our search process (Tranfield et al., 2003), which can then be addressed in future studies.

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Conflict of interest

We, the authors, declare that we have no conflict of interest.
Appendix A

Table 4 below shows the iterative development of the search string with the search expressions in bold. The development process included the 26 contributions from part 1 (the explorative and unstructured literature review) in the search results — the number in brackets in Table 4 shows the coverage of publications identified in part 1. The search period was from the database start period to 2012. The search number 11 below makes up the final result, also shown in Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search number</th>
<th>Additions to the search string (Scopus search format)</th>
<th>Scopus</th>
<th>EBSCO</th>
<th>ProQuest</th>
<th>ScienceDirect</th>
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<td>104</td>
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<td>(14)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (“project” AND “competing theories” OR “project” AND “competing perspectives”)</td>
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<td>136</td>
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<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
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<td>OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (“project management theory” AND “comparison”)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (“project management” AND “control” AND “emphasize” OR “emphasise” AND “control” AND “project management”)</td>
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<td>(15)</td>
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<td>OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (“temporary organisation” AND “project management”)</td>
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<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>347</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

* Indicates that the study is part of the literature review.


Further Reading


