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Beyond Failure and Success: A Process View on Imperfect Projects as Common Practice

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Abstract

This editorial scrutinizes the dichotomy of a project's success and failure, which, in our opinion is too rigid, inflexible, and unnuanced. The aim of this special issue is to nuance this dichotomy by moving toward a process view on how imperfection is brought about in projects. We introduce and discuss five topics important for such a process view: (1) improvisation, (2) temporality, (3) power and politics, (4) transition, and (5) intentionality. We argue that a holistic, processual view of imperfections premises emergence and continuous learning and judgments of the project both in and over time. All five articles in this special issue deal with at least one of the discussed themes of our proposed process view on imperfect projects.

Introduction

Over the past few decades there has been growing interest in theorizing and researching temporary organizations (Bakker et al., 2016; Burke & Morley, 2016; Pinto & Slevin, 1988; Sydow & Braun, 2018; Sydow, 2022). The relevance of temporary organizing forms, for example projects, in society has been widely recognized (Jensen et al., 2016; Lundin et al., 2015; Winch et al, 2023). One of the key challenges that has remained underexplored thus far and holds opportunities in this field of study, is the frequent failure of projects to meet their goals (Brown & Jones, 1998). Since projects, particularly complex projects, frequently fail (Flyvbjerg, 2021), a debate has unfolded looking at the disappointment of not meeting expectations and the perceptions of success and failure (Ika & Pinto, 2022).

Classic literature on the success and failure of temporary organizations focuses on the failure of single, isolated projects to meet their initially defined goals (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Ika, 2009; Pinto & Slevin, 1988). Notwithstanding the principal uncertainty of planning in organizational and interorganizational projects (Latusk & Vlaar, 2018), this body of literature reviews models of project success or failure by going beyond the traditional understanding marked by the iron triangle in terms of time, quality, and budget (Shenhar, 2001) and focused primarily on performance and control and only on the project at hand (Varajão et al., 2022). For example, Ika and Pinto (2022) developed a four-dimensional model of project success based on benefits realization, stakeholder perceptions, issues of timing, and sustainability. In another example, Savolainen et al. (2012) executed a literature review of IT projects to analyze success and failure criteria. This body of literature evaluates failures as deviations from the demarcations of time, quality, and budget set by the permanent organization (Winch, 2014), ranging from project breakdowns, early project deaths, and unrealized ventures as imperfections of projects, thus placing failed against successful or even perfect projects (Brown & Jones, 1998).

In perfect projects it is assumed that project goals can be formulated and met by thoroughly planning, integrating tasks, coping with risks, managing stakeholders, as if we can predict the future (Sanderson, 2012; Turner & Zolin, 2012). However, this idealized view on projects, including their success and failure, is in our opinion too rigid, inflexible, and unnuanced. We try to deconstruct the dichotomy of success and failure and see these as the premise and outcome of temporary processes. We assume epistemologically that learning is an ongoing process that unfolds over time and even across projects. Consequently, imperfect projects hold a possibility to prompt project members and stakeholders to experiment and learn how to frame a project for successful recognition

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(Stjerne & Svejenova, 2016). Imperfections and deviations provide a rich opportunity to learn but whether people learn from them can never be predicted, thus learning remains only one of many possible outcomes. Imperfections is a way of breaking with the dualistic verdict of a project outcome as either success or failure, which delimits the opportunity to learn from the nuances in between. Alternatively, imperfections can be understood as a proce's that relies on both the in and over time of judgment and people's understanding. Such an emergent learning process can result in unexpected, not anticipated learnings manifested only during the unfolding of a project. Because success is presentenced, and the end of the project is understood as the end of the collective learning process, the full learning and potential of the project may not be captured in evaluations (Schindler & Eppler, 2003). Evaluating success and failure can thus be imperfect, as various perspectives on the success of different stakeholders (Davis, 2014) may also change over time both within the temporal scope of the process and beyond.

Thus, the aim of this special issue is to nuance the dichotomy of project success and failure by moving toward a process view on how imperfection is brought about in temporary organizing —with a particular focus on projects. More seriously, the theory-informed empirical research of imperfect projects— including the beauty of imperfections in the almost successful, the near misses, and complete failures—would help to deconstruct the dichotomy of success and failure of projects and their implications for organizations, interorganizational arrangements, organizational fields, and even whole societies. Thereby, projects can and should be viewed as processes through which organizational actors try to realize agreed-upon goals and obtain possibilities to learn from imperfections and deviations. Such a process view is being adopted by a growing number of scholars (see Sergi et al.'s editorial in the PMJ special issue, "Process Studies of Project Organizing," 2020). A process approach of evaluating (embedded rather than isolated) projects can be particularly helpful in understanding indicators to measure achieved performances at the project, organization, field, and societal levels, including the temporal pace of such achievements (Abdallah et al., 2022).

In this editorial, we first explore and elaborate on the process view of success and failure of projects by discussing its various components and argue that it is of value to expect and study imperfection. We then discuss how the five articles in the special issue were selected and contribute to this process view. Finally, we present a research agenda for future research for studying the imperfection of projects and provide suggestions for practitioners in the ex-ante evaluation of projects.

Process View on the Imperfection of Projects

A process view on the imperfection of projects views this particular form of temporary organization as both an outcome and a mode of organizing in a temporal setting, often with actors from more than one organization working together. Cicmil et al.

(2006) were among the first to promote the process view to deepen the study of the actuality of projects, which is the "complex social processes that go on at various levels of project working" (2006, p. 675). The process perspective on projects "invites us to view actors, objects, places, identities, and projects, as continuously produced and reproduced in actions, interactions, practices, which then become the focus of studies" (Sergi et al., 2020, p. 4). Temporary organizations, projects in particular, are thus in a permanent state of evolving or continual becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002); at the same time, they are in urgent need of stabilization (Farjoun, 2010) through the constant actions and practices of various project actors over time (Langley, 1999).

We further explore the process view on imperfection of projects by considering some actions in more detail. Toward this end we have chosen five topics we think are important for the process view: (1) improvising and experimenting for learning (Stjerne & Svejenova, 2016); (2) temporality of evaluating projects implies imperfections (Feddersen et al., 2023); (3) power and politics in demarcating a project as success or failure (Juarez Cornelio et al., 2021); (4) success and failure beyond projects (Ika & Munro, 2022); and (5) intentionality of projects. Such more or less intentional actions or practices, some of which may accumulate over time into hard to control self-reinforcing processes (Kremser & Sydow, 2022), will be discussed as follows:

1. A process view implies the *learning from project failure* through improvising and experimenting and projections into future project success (Stjerne & Svejenova, 2016). Imperfection is a potentially rich source of insights and provides a new possibility to learn from to improve temporary organizing in general and project management in particular (Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018). Hence, rephrasing success and failure by looking at imperfections allows for insights and learnings through reflexively engaging with the unexpected, with deviations in the emergence of a project (Giddens, 1984). This may allow for a stronger connection between projects' short-term focus and the more long-term focus of the more permanent organization, which is typically more, rather than less, project based (Scarbrough et al., 2004). This is highlighted in the classical example of the project-learning paradox, which concerns the successful transfer of knowledge created in a project to the wider organizational context in which it is embedded (Schindler & Eppler, 2003; Willems et al., 2020). On the one hand, through their transience and interdisciplinary nature, project ventures are likely to be very suitable for creating knowledge in the context of their application (Grabher, 2004; Hobday, 2000; Scarbrough et al., 2004). On the other hand, however, the temporary nature of projects makes participants move on to other organizations and with this disruption, created knowledge in the project is likely to vanish (Cacciatori, 2008; Grabher, 2004; Ibert,

2004). Hence, as Qian (2023) demonstrates in one of the articles included in this special issue, such learning does not always take place, even though the need to learn from project failure may be recognized (Schindler & Eppler, 2003). How can individuals and—even more importantly and complicated—organizations or interorganizational arrangements, such as strategic alliances or networks, learn from near misses and even complete project failure? The transfer of knowledge from temporary to permanent organizational forms, for example, from the project to the organization or interorganizational arrangement—is difficult to organize (Wiewiora et al., 2019), and vicarious learning does not seem to work (Willems et al., 2020). Furthermore, the decontextualized idea of best practices seems inappropriate for learning (Fuller et al., 2011), whereas self-reinforcing processes, once triggered, often unfold unknown actors and are thus not easy to access for reflection. A processual understanding of how teams, organizations, networks, or communities learn over time from imperfect projects can answer these questions.

2. The *temporality of evaluating the success and failure* of a project is an important element of the process view, not necessarily only at the end but also in the process of temporary organizing (Rode et al., 2022). What looks like a failing or imperfect project at one point in time may turn out to be successful and quite perfect at another point in time (see in this special issue, Midler & Alochet, 2023) and vice versa. The impact of some temporary endeavors or projects can, in many cases, only be valued after a long time. In one of the articles included in this special issue, Feddersen et al. (2023) present the Vindeby project, the world's first offshore windmill park and considered an important game changer in the transition toward renewable energy production decades after its realization. A processual view on imperfection values the different modes of speed that organizations can have in adapting innovations from projects (Dille et al., 2018). In their study, Van Marrewijk and Van den Ende (2022) show that the failure of an interorganizational change project forced public and private partners to follow two diverse speeds of implementing innovations. Furthermore, temporal misfits among partners or the temporal shadows of past and future projects may also arise (Stjerne et al., 2018) and lead to the early closure or demise of a project (Novy & Peters, 2012). Again, evaluation practices or routines may emerge that lack the necessary reflexivity of actors that would have at least given them a chance to monitor and stay in control of the process.

3. A process view allows for considering *power and politics in the judging of success and failure*. First, and foremost, we ask: Who is judging and with which authority? The many stakeholders involved in especially complex projects result in different views on what a project should deliver (Ika & Pinto, 2022). A lack of clear goals,

fuzzy role expectations, internal power dynamics, or inappropriate evaluation measures can then result in the diverse judging of project success (Van Marrewijk et al., 2016). This brings us to the question: What does failure mean for organizations and interorganizational arrangements? Success for one partner can be failure for another. This is especially the case in a political context, where decisions over often complex projects are being made. For example, Juarez Cornelio et al. (2021) describe shutting down Mexico City Airport due to a change in the country's political administration. Power and politics are, like other aspects of temporary organizing, possibly subject to self-reinforcement and hence difficult to keep under control.

4. An interesting element of the process view is the *contribution of projects to transformations* of organizations (Van Marrewijk & Van den Ende, 2022) or even societies at large (Ika & Munro, 2022; Papadonikolaki et al., 2023). In this latter view, temporary organizations in general, and projects in particular, are evaluated as change events contributing to the fulfillment of grand societal challenges and societal development goals (Papadonikolaki et al., 2023; Winch et al., 2023). Projects have frequently been mentioned in driving strategic change within and across organizations (Martinsuo et al., 2022; Van Marrewijk & Van den Ende, 2022), even of entire institutional fields (Bohn & Braun, 2021). Such projects aim to initiate radical innovation, change, and transformation, often with the help of interorganizational collaborations. Thereby, such temporary organizations focus on the strategic change capacity of projects and programs (Van Marrewijk & Van den Ende, 2022). Both projects and programs can be understood as strategic endeavors for creating value (Eskerod & Ang, 2017; Lehtinen et al., 2019; Martinsuo et al., 2022), possibly even creating a new strategic path (Koch, 2011) characterized by self-reinforcement and, hence, difficult to maneuver.

5. This raises the issue of *intentionality of projects*: the tension between project goals and transition goals. To contribute to sustainability transition, projects are expected to produce outputs that can be inputs to further the transition (Gasparro et al., 2022; Nylén, 2021). Projects thus, increasingly, must contribute to the realization of a much wider transition agenda and the achievement of complex interrelated challenges on the level of the organization, interorganizational arrangement, institutional field, or even society at large as opposed to the narrow agenda of project execution (Gasparro et al., 2022; Ika & Munro, 2022). Hence, temporary organizations can function as spaces for experimentation and, by doing so, act as catalysts for organizational or institutional change (Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018; Lenfle & Söderlund, 2019; Maniak & Midler, 2014; Schüßler et al., 2013). Thereby, the

project's intentionality often reflects its embeddedness in more permanent organizations, such as its strategic and political relevance within an organization (Engwall, 2003), or a larger project network (Sydow & Staber, 2002). Consequently, temporal alignment and connections (Geraldi et al., 2020) are part of the emergence of the imperfections of the project and the judgment of a particular project as either success or failure.

A holistic, processual view of imperfections premise emergence and continuous learning and judgment of the project both in and over time. This also implies that sometimes project failure may start out as small imperfections that accumulate into the final verdict of project failure (Merrow, 2011); alternatively, it may imply evaluations of everything in between the dualism of success and failure or a stance to reorient projects to a learning perspective and divert the focus from outcome to processual insights. Hitherto, the processual perspective of imperfections reconstructs the concepts of project failure and success to an understanding of imperfections as moving targets and the emergence and learning—thus what we can learn from failed projects depends on what we can learn from the processes and its imperfections that may spur learning opportunities.

Reflecting on the Publication Process

The topic of learning from imperfect projects emerged in a discussion on a possible European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) track on temporary organizations and projects in the fall of 2020. We might not like to remember this, but at that time the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to stay at home. We combined our efforts in an EGOS call for papers on learning from failed projects and suggested this topic for a special issue of *Project Management Journal*® (PMJ), entitled "Beyond Failure and Success: A Process View on Imperfect Projects as Common Practice." The PMJ editorial board supported the initiative, and the call for papers attracted 35 short papers. After careful reading by all the editors, we accepted 21 papers at the 38th EGOS 2022 Colloquium in Vienna, Austria, and asked the authors to further develop these into full papers.

In July 2022, the scholars of these 21 papers participated in the EGOS subtheme on learning from imperfect projects. The presentations and following discussions helped both the editors and contributors improve their understanding of imperfection. We invited participating scholars, with a focus on imperfection, to submit their papers to the special issue. The call for papers was also open to other scholars in the field of project studies. Following the conference and the PMJ call for papers, papers were submitted before the end of September 2022. After a double-blind review process with two to four rounds of revisions in which the editors were actively involved, five papers were accepted and are published in this special issue.

Overview of the Articles in This Special Issue

Here we will introduce the articles in this special issue. We discuss the content of the articles and their contributions to the process view of imperfect projects as discussed above.

In their largely conceptual paper "Abolish, Accept, Apply: Coping With Ignorance in Project Ecologies," Joachim Thiel and Gernot Grabher (2023) contribute to the controversy that broke out when Flyvbjerg (2016) heavily criticized Hirschman's (1967) positive attitude toward the usefulness of lacking knowledge or ignorance. Although Kreiner (2020) had already illustrated in his article in PMJ that Kreiner and Flyvbjerg's understanding of ignorance are fundamentally different, Thiel and Grabher also see shortcomings in both understandings. To overcome these shortcomings, they examine how ignorance is addressed and framed within large-scale projects and beyond projects in their wider relational and institutional environments, which they named "project ecology" in an earlier work (Grabher, 2004). This perspective supports the multilevelness and intentionality of our processual perspective on imperfect projects with a typology of ignorance as an element of the process of decision-making in which ignorance is produced, known, and non-known. Imperfections hence emerge and depend on the perspective of ignorance as (1) either something that should be coped with and avoided; (2) as something inevitable that should be accepted and treated as unknown unknowns as a sense of cultural preparedness; or (3) as a possibility for learning and innovation, which makes imperfections opportunities that should be explored and embraced. By emphasizing the perception of imperfections, we gain a stronger epistemological understanding of how imperfections are produced and how these perceptions of imperfections influence project practices.

In the second article, entitled "Imperfections-as-Practice: Projects as Becoming Processes of Imperfections," Sunny Mosangzi Xu and Marcel L. A. M. Bogers (2023) explore the oscillating relationship between perfect project governance, for example as set in the project plan, and imperfect project governing, for example, adjustments and experiences from the past and projections of the future. In this article, the authors focused on the success of a European research and innovation project from an imperfections-as-practice approach, which understands the ongoingness of projects as socially engaged emergent processes of imperfections. Xu and Bogers contribute to theorizing on imperfections in projects by showing how the project leaps into designed and desirable future, which takes the stance of imperfections as an acceptance of the unknown unknowns and processes of pursuit through project actors acting upon emerging imperfections and the microprocesses of which imperfections are both the process and the outcome that drive the project process forward. Specifically, they show how imperfections emerge as uncertainty, ambiguity, unknown, and emergence in different project periods over time. The emerging imperfections enacted project managers to focus on retaining, reframing, exploring, and embracing the project as a becoming

process. Furthermore, the article contributes by showing how multiple project partners bring their experiences and learnings from past projects and their future expectations of the focal projects into shaping in the unfolding, ongoing project.

In the third article, Jonathan Feddersen, Henrik Koll, and Joana Geraldi (2023) take the temporality of evaluating the success and failure seriously in "The Temporality of Project Success: Vindeby, the World's First Offshore Wind Farm." In 1992, the Vindeby offshore project successfully delivered its project goals but had little significance outside its project boundaries. Only later did the significance of this offshore wind farm increase, as the knowledge derived from its construction was transferred to other offshore wind farm projects and exported to other nations. The Danish industry became positioned as the leader in offshore wind farm technologies with Vindeby being recognized as a major success. The authors contribute to our process view on imperfect projects by introducing the concepts of a project as future, present, and past, and how these constructions mutually shaped one another. They argue that the moment in time for valuing the contribution of a project is extremely important. Furthermore, they contribute to the process view by showing that Vindeby's value in the transition toward renewable wind energy was only realized several decades later.

With the fourth article, Christophe Midler and Marc Alochet (2023) aim at "Understanding the Phoenix Phenomenon: Can a Project Be Both a Failure and a Success?" This is the classic phenomenon of a project considered a failure at one point in time, turning into an astonishing success at another point in time. The authors characterize and illustrate this perhaps not so rare trajectory with reference to the development of an affordable electric vehicle and, thereby, convincingly show the importance of the time dimension to our process view for evaluating a project as a success or failure. The article further contributes to the process view with reflections on imperfect evaluation methods. Both retrospective and prospective evaluation methods are needed to capture the pitfalls and opportunities of vanguard projects that "lead the way by anticipating progress as well as gaining experience about the new activity" (Brady & Davies, 2004, p. 1607).

In both the third and fourth articles, imperfection is theorized around the temporal scope or time horizon for judgment, which critically adds another aspect to the prior perception of imperfection of the project. Epistemologically, this implies a stronger reflexivity of the temporal embeddedness of projects' evaluation points.

In the fifth and final article, Qinzhen Qian (2023) aims at answering the question: "How Did the Imperfection of an Innovation Project Come About? The Tension Between Legitimacy and Flexibility" and considers in detail the tension between flexibility and legitimacy in an interorganizational construction project. In this project, two Chinese project-based firms, characterized by high degrees of bureaucracy and institutional rules, are involved. The article contributes to the process view of imperfect projects by showing how the project management team is confronted with the imperfections in this interorganizational project emerging from the tension between legitimacy and flexibility. As the project unfolds, the premises for the project's modus operandi and the requirements of respectively low cost and tight schedule control resulted in delays, increasing costs, low quality, and a malfunctioning product. This article positions the importance of the embedded permanent organizational modus operandi, which position imperfections as tensions between two perfect ideals, whereas these inflexible ideals become the initiators of small imperfections in a process that later leads to project failure. This then leads to understanding imperfection as a result of perfect ideals and structures, which poses a peculiar dualistic puzzle in the connection between perfections and imperfections.

While the five articles included in our special issue differ in several dimensions—most importantly, the degree to which they mobilize project failure as presented in the beginning of this editorial—they share several similarities we would like to highlight. First, all five articles deal with at least one of the discussed themes of our proposed process view on the imperfect projects: learning from failure, temporality, power and politics, multilevel focus, and intentionality. Particularly popular seems to be the temporality of project success and failure, as all five papers touch upon this issue. Examples of this are the evaluation of the Vindeby wind farm project after 30 years (Feddersen et al., 2023) and the successful rising of a failed project later in time (Midler & Alochet, 2023). Clearly, time and timing matter in project-based organizing, even more than in permanent organizations or interorganizational arrangements.

Three of the articles engage with the issue of understanding project failure, success, imperfections, and undertones over time in more detail (Qian, 2023; Thiel & Grabher, 2023; Xu & Bogers, 2023). For example, Xu and Bogers (2023) introduce an imperfections-as-practice approach that attends to the ongoing of projects as socially engaged processes of imperfections. This seems to be the key to unfolding this issue of imperfections further in more nuances as, for instance, in the temporal complexities (Garud et al., 2011) if not ambitemporalities (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015), which are studied outside project management research.

Midler and Alochet (2023) and Feddersen et al. (2023) focused on the learning from imperfect projects. Such learning can take place after the initial failure of a project resulting in learnings from and the achievements of new success (Midler & Alochet, 2023), or learning the key technology of offshore wind energy, which has become a major strategy in decarbonizing the energy sector (Feddersen et al., 2023).

Finally, the multilevel focus acknowledging the relationship between project and transition goals is presented in two articles (Feddersen et al., 2023; Thiel & Grabher, 2023). For example, the modes and spheres of addressing and coping with ignorance happen between and beyond large projects (Thiel & Grabher, 2023).

However, none of the articles explicitly addresses processes that, because of self-reinforcement, are beyond the control of

organizational actors. In this area, specifically and also with respect to temporal complexities, we see the need to advance the process view of imperfect projects as a common practice.

Conclusions and Future Research Opportunities

Most of all, with this introduction and the special issue, we would like to encourage scholars to develop imperfect project management thinking by exploring what can be learned from near misses or failing projects. Such learning would allow for a more realistic maneuvering in the often smaller than thought corridor between success and failure. For learning from failing projects, it would not only be important to engage further with the complexity of temporalities of temporary organizations in general, and organizational and interorganizational projects in particular, but also any kind of self-reinforcing processes working often unknown to the actors and nevertheless impacting success and failure significantly.

Furthermore, the understanding of project success, failure, and imperfections as well as learning from these, can be of great importance to view from an in-time perspective, as this holds the potential to understand the meanings created in time. Learning from failure is part of a larger temporal web of pasts and future connections that organize project goals, the tasks, and the understanding of the projects expected transition in a future point in time. Such an understanding opens new avenues to explore learning from failed projects as well as the successes and practices that projects reenact.

Potential, more balanced theories much better than teleological, contingency, and consistency theories (with their overemphasis on action and structure, respectively) capture the process of projects' becoming and being an imperfect practice: practice-based theories, including practice-driven institutionalism; dialectical, political, and sensemaking theories—all sometimes supplemented by specialized theories that are particularly sensitive to time and self-reinforcement.

This special issue brings new practical implications when judging and setting in advance goals that will determine in a future point in time when a project is a success or a failure. "When do I do good in the project?" should imply a reflection on potential diverse measurements over time and be open to broader success criteria and different perspectives for judging project success, failure, imperfections, and potential learning opportunities. While projects are delimited in time, their evaluation and verdict of success or failure should not be. Good portfolio management would systematically and more reflexively draw on past projects over time and be aware of their temporal scope in judgment.

This imperfect project management thinking is especially relevant to the study of a project's influence on larger transition goals (Winch et al., 2023). Failure or moderate success can count in a project, but the same project can be successful for

a transformation, as shown in the Vindeby case (Feddersen et al., 2023). Successful innovation projects imply projections into a yet unexperienced future (Sanderson, 2012) while also striking the right balance between the reproduction of recognizable familiar (past) and a new unfamiliar (future). Hence, this also implies that the imperfection of not being able to strictly follow a project plan, predefine a clear goal for transition, and potentially adjusting the team as we learn, should be the norms in innovative projects.

In conclusion, the processual view brings important nuances to understanding project failure, success, and imperfections and has implications for both academics and practitioners within temporary organizations, particularly for project studies.

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